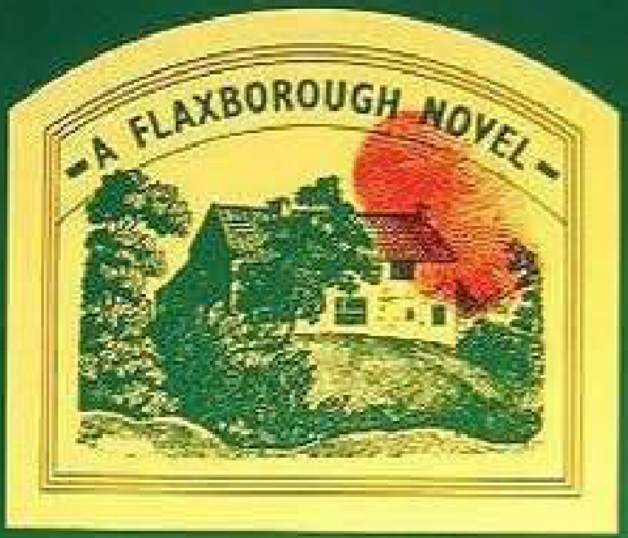
Colin Watson

Plaster Sinners



Plaster Sinners
Flaxborough [11]
Colin Watson
Mandarin (1980)

The appreciation of antique objects is not perhaps Detective Sergeant Sidney Love's forte, yet his critical appraisal of Lot Thirty-Four - comprising two golf balls, an LMS railway tumbler, an old meat mincer, two decanter stoppers, a soap dish and a moulded relief of a cottage entitled 'At the End of Life's Lane' - at an antiques auction which sets events in motion. The sale of Lot Thirty-Four at the handsome price of Â£400, together with further curious developments, leads Inspector Purbright to the heart of a chilling but decidedly genteel murder mystery... First published in 1980, Plaster Sinners is the eleventh novel in the Flaxborough series and displays Watson's characteristic dry wit and striking observation. 'Flaxborough is Colin Watson's quiet English town whose outward respectability masks a seething pottage of greed, crime and vice... Mr Watson wields a delightfully witty pen dripped in acid.' Daily Telegraph 'Arguably the best, and certainly the most consistent of comic crime writers, delicately treading the line between wit and farce... Funny, stylish and good mysteries to boot.' TIME OUT 'One of the best. As always with Watson, the writing is sharp and stylish and wickedly funny!' Literary Review

About the Author

Colin Watson was born in 1920. He worked as a journalist but was most famous for his twelve 'Flaxborough' novels, set in a small fictional town in England. Four of the 'Flaxborough' novels were adapted for television by the BBC under the series title Murder Most English and Watson's Detective Inspector Purbright remains one of the most intellectual detectives in the crime genre. Colin Watson died in 1983.

Plaster Sinners

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Chapter One

Detective Sergeant Sidney Love had that happy degree of appreciation of works of art that is unlikely ever to become soured by scholarship. Nor was he acquisitive by nature, if the single exception be made of a complete set of "Giants of Steam" that was his legacy from an uncle who had smoked himself to death in the cigarette card era. As an aesthete, he was an all-rounder; honest and unpretentious: a sunset man, not soppy over gnomes, but ever ready to be pleased by a waterfall. Of cottages, too, he highly approved.

It was upon a cottage—or upon a representation of one—that Sergeant Love was gazing at ten minutes to nine one Thursday morning in the Volunteers' Hall, Flaxborough.

At half-past ten there was to begin one of the town's regular sales by auction of valuable antiques, that being the trade term for broken furniture, thrown-out pictures, cracked crockery, out-worn domestic machinery and discarded odds and ends of domestic adornment.

Most of the dealers had taken their view and had gone outside to drink from flasks of coffee in the cabs of their pick-up trucks or leaning on their estate Wagons. The more observant had noticed Love's presence in the hall. It added to the interest of the occasion a possibility that one or more of the lots were on the police's stolen list.

But the sergeant was not in search of stolen property. He was off duty until lunch-time and had been turning over in his mind the adventurous idea of actually taking part in the bidding. A model of a cottage, a bas-relief plaster cast, painted and framed, strongly commended itself to Love as a suitable tribute to his young lady, whose "Ooo, dinky!" he had learned over a courtship of several years to value as the highest encouragement of his intentions in that direction.

He looked about him and considered.

All the goods on offer in the well-heated but dreary building were arranged in moveable rows at the further end, with big articles such as wardrobes towering darkly against the yellow-painted brick wall. In front of the wardrobes were stacked tables and cupboards and commodes; gramophones that would still wind up and clocks that

would not; a bread mixing bowl and a magic lantern and a set of records to teach Spanish; a bundle of golf clubs and a public house mirror advertising stout; a game suitable for all the family called Trippo; four refrigerators; a gas cooker with a herb-drying attachment; a meat safe; half an *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; a urinal and a knitting basket. There were other remarkable things of which Love took no notice.

The cottage upon which he had set his desire was at great remove from all these. It was not even dignified by a lot number of its own, having been tossed into one of a number of trays and shallow boxes in which miscellaneous bric-a-brac was offered for sale in small and unrelated batches. The cottage was accompanied by a pair of mauled golf balls, a tumbler formerly belonging to the London, Midland and Scottish Railway, a small meat mincer lacking means of being clamped anywhere, two decanter stoppers and a soap dish feverishly embellished with roses (Love's practical turn of generosity had already chosen his landlady as recipient-elect of this).

Prospective buyers had been free to walk about the saleroom since eight o'clock. Many had come and left again after laying claim to one of the chairs set in rows throughout the hall. A coat or a shopping basket or even a catalogue was recognized as sufficient tally. At this particular moment, though, the place was almost empty. Apart from the assistant auctioneer, his clerk, two porters and a dealer, all of whom were gathered near the auctioneer's pulpit-like desk, no one was present but Sergeant Love and a man almost immediately behind him, a man in dark, unobtrusive clothing, who was as deeply preoccupied with a pair of cast-iron door knobs as was Love with his cottage.

This man, had Love been observing the elementary rules of his profession and keeping one eye on anyone within coshing distance, would have been noted by him as being a little shorter than himself, with a sallow complexion and black hair that he was constantly smoothing back until it gathered in a ragged hank at the nape of his neck. The sergeant would have noticed also that he had a small mouth permanently held a little open by protruding teeth. This, together with an air of readiness to listen and a faint but enduring smile, gave the man an expression of simple, almost childlike amiability.

"Like a character out of *Wind in the Willows*," Love might have described him to Detective Inspector Purbright, and the inspector would have understood what he meant. Purbright would not, however, have dreamed of offering the comparison either to Flaxborough's patrician chief constable, or in any circumstances where it might arouse the fatuous derision of such hard-hats of literary criticism as officers Harper, Brevitt and Braine.

Not that Purbright was ever called upon to do so, for Love remained unaware of his companion's existence, let alone the details of his appearance, up to the very moment when the door knob struck the back of his head just above the collar line and endowed him with almost immediate unconsciousness.

The sergeant fell silently, loosely and vertically into folds. From his new position on the floor he could be seen by none of the group near the auction stand. When next one of them happened to glance in that direction, he noticed that the tall, very clean-faced young gentleman (a policeman, was he?—yes, so he was, although terribly young surely?) had gone, presumably by one of the emergency exits, and that there now was no one else in that part of the hall but a man of middle years who appeared to find breathing somewhat difficult.

As soon as the casual observer—it was, in fact, the auctioneer's clerk, Lewcock—had turned away once more, the man bobbed down and resumed the task from which physical exhaustion allied with a sense of self-preservation had prompted him to rise for air and a look round.

Sergeant Love had settled into an inert heap that was proving difficult to shift. His assailant abandoned trying to turn him over by heaving on one arm. He set to work on a leg. This was even less promising of result. Next he tried to get both hands under one shoulder whilst crouching astride the sergeant. By now he was breathing very heavily indeed and he soon had to surface once more, without having achieved anything.

Very cautiously, he rose and glanced towards the group by the auction stand. The porters were drinking mugs of coffee, their backs turned. The dealer had moved further away and was in conversation with some new arrivals at the main door. Other people came in. Lewcock was writing in a ledger at the dictation of the assistant auctioneer.

The man took half a dozen slow, deep breaths, then knelt beside the policeman to make a final effort to retrieve the object which Love, in his last moment of consciousness, had clutched and buried beneath his sixteen stones of body.

The man insinuated the fingers of his right hand between the floor and Love's chest. He pushed. He felt, or thought he felt, the edge of a hard, square article. But already he had lost his chance.

The sergeant sighed, groaned, stirred. The man, who had been watching Love's closed eyes, was alarmed to see the lids tremblingly begin to part. He tugged his hand free and half ran, half crept towards the escape door he had noted earlier.

His departure was unremarked.

Not so the elevation of his victim, whose attempt to hold himself

steady toppled a Benares tray and several smaller articles of percussion. Everyone in the hall turned and stared.

Harrap, the assistant auctioneer, a young man of solemn but scarcely commanding appearance, tried to look outraged. He made what he hoped were authoritative gestures with his pen, indicating Love to the two porters, as if to order his arrest. One of the porters began to move reluctantly in Love's direction. Then he recognized the sergeant and stopped.

"It's a policeman," he said to Harrap.

Harrap peered, scowlingly. "That makes it all the worse." He raised his voice. "I say...over there...what do you think you're doing?"

Love swayed and explored the back of his head with one hand.

Others in the hall, seeing his paleness, hurried forward. First to reach him was a middle-aged woman.

"Sergeant, whatever have you been doing?" She grasped his arm and urged him towards a kitchen chair, which she tested first with a dubious little shake.

Love stared at her face for several seconds after sitting down, then smiled suddenly. "I don't suppose it was you who hit me, was it, Miss Teatime?" The smile died. The sergeant looked very sorry for himself.

Miss Lucilla Teatime, dealer in *objets d'art* and proprietress of the House of Yesteryear, in Northgate, Flaxborough, gave a frown of concern. She knew that it must have taken a considerable blow to render Mr Love amenable to being led to chairs.

"I think," she said to the clerk, Lewcock, who had just arrived with others, "that you should send at once for an ambulance. Sergeant Love has suffered an accident. He could be quite poorly."

Lewcock had never before seen a policeman with a paper-white face. He made for the telephone without question or argument.

Love sat meekly in the chair, which was too low for him, and gazed at what still he held incongruously cradled in his big hands.

Miss Teatime saw it too and decided it was time to make a little conversation before onlookers put an unflattering interpretation upon what had been going on.

"What a charming little model, sergeant. The ideal cottage for your retirement—is that how you see it?" (At least the fools shouldn't get the idea now that *she* had pinched it.)

Love's regard for what he held grew fond, but he did not say anything.

"I very much hope that article was not removed from one of the trays of sale exhibits." The voice of Harrap; his errand not mercy but supervision.

Miss Teatime looked on with interest. Was it feasible to commit

shoplifting in a saleroom? If so, it certainly would be the first case figuring a police officer as defendant.

The porter who had spoken earlier was consulting a bundle of papers. “It’s with thirty-four.” He took the plaster cast from Love and restored it to the company of the glass, the golf balls, decanter stoppers, meat mincer and soap dish.

“Anything else missing?” asked Harrap.

The porter gave him a scowl.

An ambulance arrived in less than five minutes. Love, much embarrassed and growing increasingly resistant as his head cleared, found himself escorted from the hall like a common drunk by two uniformed attendants with bespectacled, rather motherly faces, who smelled of tobacco and disinfectant and kept using wrong names.

Before suffering the final indignity of being thrust into the ambulance, Love managed to twist around and address the dozen or so people who had gathered to watch. He complained that he, an officer of the law, had been attacked, had been knocked out, in fact; that his assailant was still at large; that he—the said assailant—had shown himself by his behaviour to be a cunning and violent character; and that members of the public would do better to report matters to Fen Street police headquarters and help hunt the criminal than to stand idly by and see an officer prevented from doing his duty.

The speech was worthy of Sidney Carton, let alone Sidney Love, whose public utterances until then had been restricted to a comic monologue, “ ’Ere, ’old me ’elmet, says I”, at a charity concert, and the reading of a flood-warning in the market place after the river bank burst in 1972, immobilizing the police loudspeaker van. But whatever effect his words might have had was cancelled by the sight of the two ambulance men slamming shut the rear doors of their vehicle and securing them with a set of levers and bolts that seemed better suited to a bank or a cold store. That, everyone knew, was Authority; so the poor young chap inside must either be drunk or have gone funny.

The spectators went back into the saleroom, to which also returned, in his own good time, the man who had hit the sergeant. He took a seat at the side of the hall, not far from the front.

Harrap, back in his place, spoke quietly to Lewcock. “Did *you* see anybody hit that policeman?”

“I didn’t see anybody anywhere near him.”

“Nor did I,” said Harrap, meaningfully.

“I don’t think he was on duty,” said Lewcock. “Not that one can tell.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, he’s a detective, isn’t he? Plain clothes man.”

Harrap sniffed. “It’s as well Mr Durham hasn’t arrived yet. He’d

not take kindly to policemen coming in here and playing ducks and drakes with the lots, in or out of uniform."

By the time the ambulance arrived at Flaxborough General Hospital, its unwilling passenger had developed a full-scale headache and was feeling sick. He offered no objection to being transferred, with kindly efficiency, to a wheelchair and having a blanket put about his shoulders. "Sharp's the word, Roger, old son," one of his escort informed him. "We'll have you between sheets in no time, Jack," declared the other.

Love felt that a joke of some sort was being offered him. He smiled and chuckled to show that he bore these friendly, if misinformed, men no blame for, the ridiculous mistake of which he had been made victim. Or he tried to. The actual result was a sudden lopsidedness of face and a sound suggestive of the death rattle of a sheep.

He was taken up seven floors in a lift and wheeled along a corridor. Droopy men in dressing-gowns stared at him impassively as he was whisked by. His escort seemed now to have embarked upon some kind of race. Eventually the chair was given a sickening half-turn and halted. "Everything all right, Frank?" he was asked.

They were in a small annexe. Love's chair had been parked in front of a table so that its occupant was squarely presented to a woman in a white coat seated at the opposite side of the table. Before her lay a ledger, some piles of forms and two card-index boxes.

"Name?" The woman's tone, though kindly, was automatic. Her pen was ready over a clean page of the ledger. Love had the feeling that whatever she now set down would commit him to a process that could never be revoked or modified.

"I am a police officer and I wish to report at once to my station," declared Love. His voice sounded terribly loud in his own ears, and truculent, too. "Sorry," he added,"but some person attacked me."

The woman smiled patiently. She was wearing small steel-rimmed glasses. Her hair, which was ash-blonde, hung to the same length all the way round her head. Like a dust cover, thought Love.

"I'll have to ring my inspector," he said.

"Name?" the woman asked again, in exactly the same tone.

"Purbright is his name. Mine's Love. Detective Sergeant Sidney..."—he paused—"...Montgomery Love."

The hospital porter who had piloted Love from the ground floor leaned and spoke in his ear. "It's all right, Harry, they've put a call through from reception downstairs. To the police station. They know you're here."

The woman asked the sergeant his address and he told her. "Religion?"

"Congregational," Love said. "Well, more or less."

He supposed it was his indecisiveness that made the woman frown, but the real reason was the narrowness of the ledger column.

"C of E—that'll do, won't it?" she suggested.

"It isn't the same."

She put down Cong.

Love asked the porter anxiously: "Are they telling my people that somebody had a go at me? I mean, I don't want them thinking that it was just an accident. There should be someone there at that saleroom."

"Has he given a urine specimen?" The woman had switched into that special third person form of address whereby hospital patients are given a sense of suspended existence.

"He'll be on Nine B," she said finally,"if they decide on admission. He'd better go along to X-Ray for the moment." And she handed the porter a card.

"You'll be there in two ticks, Jack," confided the porter in Love's ear. The wheelchair lurched out into mid-corridor and began to gather speed.

Chapter Two

The message from the general hospital was to the effect that a Constable Lovell had been admitted with suspected appendicitis.

Detective Inspector Purbright, accustomed to the ever-increasing uncertainty of communications, was only momentarily disconcerted by the errors in rank and name. What did puzzle him, though, was the tentative diagnosis. Love's appendix had been removed long ago. He decided to visit the invalid in person.

Love had had his X-ray and was lying, gloomily resigned, upon a trolley in the corridor of the casualty ward.

"I haven't to move my head for a bit," he explained to Purbright.

The inspector had been searching for him for some minutes. He peered down now at the blanket enshrouded sergeant with a hesitant smile, as upon a well-meant but useless birthday present.

"What does the doctor say?"

"The radiologist," Love amended, "says there's nothing broken. I think they want to keep me in overnight, though. You can't play about with concussion," he added.

"Indeed, you cannot, Sid." Purbright, having made the fairly easy deductive transfer from appendicitis to a knock on the head, realized with a touch of shame that he was prepared to humour his

unfortunate sergeant and to discount his replies as probable delirium.

Love frowned with unwonted severity and raised himself a little upon one elbow. “The trouble is, I can’t even give a description.”

“You can’t?” The inspector made a don’t-worry face, then looked about him. A man in a white coat was issuing from a nearby door. Purbright waylaid him. They held brief conversation.

Purbright returned to Love. “Apparently somebody took a crack at you.” He sounded surprised and slightly apologetic.

They tell me you’re quite lucid, actually,” Purbright added. “It’s thanks to the thickness of the bone structure. So now we can get on with things.” He gave Love’s trolley a business-like tap, as if it were a shop counter.

The sergeant shrugged beneath his blanket. There was a pause. Purbright supposed him to be sorting out the medical compliments.

“What on earth were you doing at an antique sale, Sid?” tried Purbright for a start.

Another shrug. “There was something I might have put a bid in for,” said Love with a certain airiness. “A cottage for my young lady.”

“A *cottage*?” The inspector’s doubts returned.

“Yes. In miniature. Very cleverly done. And a soap dish sort of made out of roses. There are,” explained the sergeant with the assurance of the novitiate, “some rather nice things to be snapped up at these sales—if you keep your eyes open.”

“It’s rather a pity you didn’t do just that when...” the inspector was beginning, meanly, when a pair of white-clad orderlies presented themselves at head and foot of Love’s trolley and launched it into one of those speed trials that seemed to be the accepted means of transporting the sick.

By the time it was possible to continue the interview, the sergeant had been weighed, measured, induced to pass urine, encased in a pair of hospital-issue pyjamas of the kind more usually associated with chain-gang wear, and put into a bed. In this interval, Purbright had made a couple of telephone calls. He told the sergeant that three men from Fen Street were on their way to the saleroom and that Mr Hector Durham, the auctioneer, had agreed to postpone the sale a while if that should seem helpful.

“I’ll go straight over, Sid. Now are you certain you saw nothing at all of the gentleman who put you in here?”

Love said he had given the question much thought but was convinced that no part of the attacker had come within his range of vision. “I’ll bet he wore soft shoes, though,” he added. “The floor in that hall is wood; you can hear the slightest footstep or scuffle.”

“But you didn’t.”

Love stared in silence at the ceiling for a moment, then looked at

the inspector: “I tell you what I *did* hear though. When I was being hit —you know, just a fraction of a second before whatever it was arrived on the back of my neck—there was a sound that I’d have thought queer if only I’d had time to think about it.”

A nurse entered. She hung a chart-board on the bottom bedrail and, almost in the same movement, stuck a thermometer in Love’s mouth. She hooked a couple of plump, very white fingers around his wrist. For the next half-minute she gazed alternately at her watch and at Purbright’s face. The watch, Purbright felt, was an easy winner.

The girl read the thermometer with grave concentration. Love, watchful for intimations of mortality, jumped when she gave it two violent shakes and bolstered it in a little tube at the back of the locker.

“This noise, Sid,” prompted Purbright when the nurse had departed.

Love stopped wondering if the taste of the disinfectant on the thermometer meant that he had suffered brain damage.

“All I can remember,” he said, “is a sound like somebody trying to open a door. But it came from there, right there.” He pointed to the back of his head.

“When you say *door*...” Purbright frowned, and with a gesture invited Love to elucidate.

The sergeant said merely: “Yes, well...” and looked sulky.

Purbright tried other lines of questioning. “You’re sure, are you, Sid, that you saw no one in or near the Volunteers’ Hall who might have a grudge against you?”

“Against *me*?”

“A misconceived grudge, naturally.”

“I didn’t see anybody I knew—apart from Mr Harrap and one or two of the saleroom people,” Love said. “There were plenty outside who looked pretty villainous, mind you.”

Purbright recognized that one of Love’s infrequent jokes was on the way.

“You know—dealers,” explained the sergeant.

The inspector drew a rough sketch in his notebook. “If that’s the saleroom, with the auctioneer’s stand there, whereabouts were you?”

Love put a cross. He thought a moment. “The stuff I was looking at was lot number thirty-four,” he said. “You’ll find the place from that, if the sale hasn’t started.”

The sale had not started, but more than a hundred people had taken their seats.

Purbright sought out the auctioneer.

Mr Hector Durham, the senior—indeed, the sole surviving original partner in Walker, Durham and Tait, was known as Old Noddy by reason of the sympathetic reflex movement that had begun

simply as an encouragement of bidders but now was involuntary and permanent.

Oh, yes, nodded Mr Durham, the inspector was welcome to make what investigations he liked. Would he mind, though, if the first lot were put up at eleven o'clock? There were more wardrobes than usual this week and wardrobes did drag a bit.

"Sorry to hear about young Love," said Mr Durham, his big, kindly head going up and down like a beam engine. "Was he trying to arrest somebody or what? Nobody here saw what happened."

The inspector was directed to what Old Noddy understood to be the area in which the sergeant had been attacked.

"I'm going for my breakfast now," said Mr Durham, "but Mr Harrap will look after you."

The inspector crossed the hall. Nearly all the front six rows of seats were occupied, three-quarters of them by women. Most of them seemed to know one another. There was quite a festive air. A policeman in uniform, Constable Hooley, marked the scene of the assault as surely as a lighthouse amidst a shoal of rocks. The inspector told him that he might take his helmet off if he liked. Hooley did so but he continued to hold it, like a chalice, perhaps for fear that setting it down would invite its being swept into the sale.

Purbright stopped and surveyed lot thirty-four. He saw Love's cottage. It was inscribed in one corner: "At the End of Life's Lane". He turned it over. Nothing. Plaster, was it? He scratched at one of the roses round the cottage door. The red flaked off, leaving chalky whiteness.

"Quite artistic, isn't it?"

Purbright turned. Lewcock, Mr Durham's clerk, was behind him. The probability was that Harrap had sent him to see that nothing was messed about with; Mr Harrap's distrust of humanity did not exclude police inspectors.

He replaced the cottage and looked over the other items in the tray. Lewcock offered no further opinions but kept close.

Purbright examined the floor. He saw the table that Love had pulled down with him. It had since been replaced. Purbright strolled past it. He looked to his left. A door, marked Emergency Exit. It opened easily enough. Beyond it was a narrow lane. No one was in the lane.

Purbright returned to lot thirty-four. Nearby were six or seven similar collections of miscellaneous articles. He began methodically to search through those that were within reasonable reaching distance of where Love had stood.

Lewcock and PC Hooley watched. They noted with due solemnity that he did his poking around with a pencil. "Prints," breathed Mr

Hooley to his companion.

Suddenly Purbright paused. He draped a handkerchief over something in one of the trays and carefully withdrew it. The others saw first the shape, then the object, as the inspector shook back the folds of the handkerchief. He held a heavy, cast-iron door-knob, connected by a square spindle to its smaller fellow.

The assembly rattled when shaken. But there was no doubt that it would have served tolerably well as a club.

"I'm afraid," said Purbright to Lewcock, "that I'm going to have to take charge of this for a while. Mr Durham will understand when you explain. Now then—a box, perhaps? Nothing elaborate..."

When PC Hooley had departed for Fen Street with the parcelled evidence and some simple but careful instructions, Purbright moved into the main body of the hall and found himself a seat.

The early part of the sale, the "warming up" in the language of auctioneers, was being conducted by the ascetic Mr Harrap. He took bids with great condescension. Some starters he refused to countenance, treating them either as feeble jokes or as the interjections of lunatics.

Two pounds fifty was offered for a tin box containing a soup tureen, a pair of spanners and assorted curtain rings. "Doesn't anyone realize," asked Mr Harrap with censorious surprise, "what a collectable item today is the Victorian curtain ring?"

No one did, it seemed, for the two-fifty went untopped. Mr Harrap eyed the next item anxiously. It was a child's toy baking set, *circa* 1949, almost complete, in original box, very collectable. Ten pence was offered. Mr Harrap declined to hear.

Lot thirty-four was reached after about half an hour.

The tray was brought for display to the audience. The porter held it as if it contained a selection of rare gems. He swung it slowly before him, so that everyone might have a view.

Purbright could see the plaster representation of the cottage in the centre of the other things. It was propped up slightly. Probably by one of the decanter stoppers. The mauled golf balls had settled into a corner of the tray.

"There is in this lot," explained Mr Harrap, "an item that is much sought after these days. I do not have to tell you what it is." The porter did not need telling, either. He reverently shifted the meat mincer to a more prominent position.

"Do I hear five pounds?" inquired Mr Harrap. His expression implied that it might have been fifty but he was playing safe. Someone laughed. The auctioneer looked shocked.

There was a long silence.

"Four pounds."

The bidder was a sturdy, compact woman with a much-lined face and an air of authority. In her seventies, perhaps, she still conveyed an impression of indifference to wear and tear. Her rather dingy woollen coat was belted determinedly. She wore an outsize hat, not unlike a lifeboatman's in style.

Mr Harrap's almost deferential acknowledgment of this woman's bid established that she was familiar to him. He gazed into the outfield.

"I have accepted a call of four pounds as opener, ladies and gentlemen. A very modest opener. Again, do I hear five?"

Most of the audience sat hunch-shouldered, keeping hands low and still, in case of misinterpretation. No one in particular could be seen talking, yet there was a great deal of noise from general conversation. It was substantially a crowd of spectators. The actual participants, the bidders, formed a tiny minority scattered among the rest like spies sending secret messages. Only the quicksilver eye of the auctioneer divined their purpose from the flutter of a catalogue, the lift of an eyebrow.

Regular salegoers had had very poor expectations of lot thirty-four. A first bid of four pounds for such poor trash came as quite a surprise. It was not like the shabby but astute Mrs Moldham-Clegg to set the pace so high. Had stolen glasses from the London, Midland and Scottish Railway suddenly acquired rarity value?

Purbright had been to such a sale only once before in his life. His sole concern at this one was to see if anybody present qualified—in the light of the inspector's special knowledge of Flaxborough grievances—as the opportunist who had felled Sid Love in that temporarily deserted corner of the saleroom.

He gazed about him for several minutes but failed to spot a likely candidate.

Meanwhile, the bidding for lot thirty-four had risen, quite unaccountably, to ten pounds and promised to go even further.

Mrs Moldham-Clegg led a small field of some half dozen contenders. She put in each bid with stern assurance as if it were an instruction for the goods to be knocked down to her at once and delivered to the tradesmen's entrance.

But her few rivals were perverse and kept jacking up their offers.

Miss Teatime showed no sign of interest for several minutes, during which she seemed to be giving full attention to a quiet conversation with her neighbour. Then, suddenly, up went her face and a sweet but distinct, "Twenty pounds."

Purbright directed at her a frown of disbelief.

She smiled at him and made a little inclination of the head in recognition and greeting.

Purbright repented of the frown. He nodded and smiled back.

"Twenty-one," declared Mr Harrap, triumphantly. He pointed with his gavel in Purbright's direction.

Auction novice though he was, the inspector knew he was in a situation governed by a rule exactly similar to that applicable to drowning: don't struggle. He resisted the huge temptation to shake his head and cry denial. Silent, motionless and dreadfully apprehensive, he waited for rescue.

It came after what seemed a very long time. "And fifty," barked Mrs Moldham-Clegg. Purbright sent her a grateful glance but otherwise stirred no muscle.

Bidding rose to thirty pounds. Mr Harrap looked as nearly jovial as it was constitutionally possible for him to look. When Miss Teatime took it to thirty-five, he was so tipsy with success that he essayed a witticism about "the lady's age" but mercifully spoiled it by fumbling the words.

At forty pounds, Harrap had sobered up again. His face showed something approaching bewilderment, and he paused for a while to confer with his clerk.

The sale went on. Miss Teatime did not bid again, but Harrap was now receiving signs from two directions other than that of Mrs Moldham-Clegg. Forty pounds. Forty-five. Fifty. All chatter in the hall ceased. What seemed a mad contest for a tray of junk held captive a silent audience.

Purbright tried to see who the other two bidders were. Neither made any gesture visible from where the inspector sat, so he had to look at the faces of other people who were watching them, and work out a solution geometrically by a system of crossed bearings.

One, he decided, was Mr Clapper Buxton, a Flaxborough solicitor's confidential clerk.

The other appeared to be a man Purbright had noted a little earlier as a stranger to the town, a man with protruding teeth and an air of wanting to be helpful.

The hundred-pound mark was reached and passed. There had set in a rhythm of bid and counter-bid that was raising the price more quickly. Only one voice was to be heard, though. Mrs Moldham-Clegg's. It was now perceptibly grittier and edged with a sort of patrician contempt. Mr Harrap gave it heed, then turned his eye without delay to collect the silent instructions first of Mr Clapper, then of the stranger.

Both seemed prepared to give stony assent for ever, or for as long as Mrs Moldham-Clegg cared to defy them.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds."

Purbright saw the squaring of the woman's back, the rug she gave

at the big lifeboatman's hat. Generations of Flaxborough shopkeepers had quailed before such intimations of prerogative.

Harrap looked in Clapper's direction and raised his brow. "And sixty?" Then, at once, to the stranger: "May I say seventy, sir?"

Taking elaborate care to make no movement that might be construed as a bid, Purbright eased himself along to the end of the row. He heard the command of Mrs Moldham-Clegg: "Two hundred and eighty pounds." He waited a moment, then cautiously crossed the aisle and stood in the lee of the side wall.

The offers continued to rise. Harrap looked pale; he was beginning to wonder if he were being made the victim of some conspiratorial leg-pull.

Purbright moved slowly up the hall, keeping close to the wall.

"Twenty-three, sir?"

The inspector was level with the front row of seats. He gained the shelter of the auctioneer's stand, and, stooping, edged towards the clerk's table.

Lewcock saw him. He leaned sideways in his chair, presenting an ear. Purbright whispered good morning into it.

"Morning, inspector." A breathed greeting, as in church.

"What," whispered Purbright, "is he selling-the Mona Lisa?"

"I reckon," Lewcock confided, "that either they're barmy or they've got the wrong lot."

"It's there to be seen, though. They can't all be mistaken."

Lewcock shrugged. "Barmy, then. It's rubbish. I've looked at it."

Above them waved the auctioneer's arm, conjuring more bids with dream-like ease.

"Give him a message, will you, Mr Lewcock," murmured the inspector.

"Not during bidding, I can't."

"That's up to you, but I think it's only fair he should know that the goods he is now offering for sale will not be immediately available."

"What do you mean?"

Purbright was writing in his notebook. "They are, as you might say, impounded. Temporarily, one hopes." He half-turned to check what he had written with the contents of the tray still held dutifully by the porter. "Here is Mr Harrap's official receipt."

Lewcock regarded the torn-off leaf in bewilderment.

"I think you had better tell him at once," the inspector said. "Confidentially, though. Don't give any impression of alarm."

Across the clerk's face spread the sunshine of a guess that something was up. "Ah—not to stop the fish biting," he remarked, with a maddeningly knowing lift of one eyebrow.

Purbight gave him as much of a smile as he could summon: a thin, neuralgic wince.

Lewcock rose. He touched Harrap's sleeve. The auctioneer looked anxious and angry, but he bent to listen. What he heard seemed to intensify both the anxiety and the anger. He addressed Purbright in a whisper that could be heard all over the hall.

"These items are the property of private clients. You cannot interfere with a correctly conducted sale. I am in the middle of taking bids, inspector. You must excuse me."

And he gazed out over the heads of the, by now, much intrigued audience.

"Oh, God!" breathed Purbright to himself. "Tell him," he said to Lewcock, "that nobody's stopping his sale, but that I can and will if he's going to be awkward. A policeman has been hurt here this morning. And now there is this very odd bidding. Somebody has to explain it. I am not being unreasonable."

The intermediary went aloft again. This time Harrap paused before delivering a reply and then it was for the hearing of Lewcock alone.

"He says," Lewcock reported to the inspector, "that you can do as you like as long as you take responsibility, but can he finish taking bids first. It's the commission, of course," Lewcock confided. "He wants the old man to feel inferior."

"I shall want the names of bidders," Purbright said. "Every person who has put in a bid for this lot number, I mean. Also the name of the owner. Can you do that for me?"

The clerk nodded. "I can jot them down now, actually. Well, all but one." He sat straight and peered into the hall. "Oh..."

Purbright saw the frown of puzzlement. He knew, before Lewcock spoke, what had happened.

The stranger who had seemed so keen to acquire lot thirty-four against the opposition of Mrs Moldham-Clegg and Mr Buxton was no longer in his seat.

So far as Purbright could make out in a quick, sweeping scrutiny, the man had departed altogether.

"Don't let anyone shift that stuff. I'll be back for the names in half a minute."

Careless now of obtrusiveness, Purbright strode to the back of the hall. There he was assured by PC Phillips and Detective Harper that no one had left the hall by the main doors. Perhaps one of the three emergency exits...? Helpful.

"Ask people," he told them. "Particularly near the doors. Man in dark clothing, probably a quiet stepper. Receding chin. Rather friendly face, actually."

Mr Harrap, all too aware that his brief and fantastic transposition into a Sotheby's-like world was about to come to an end, was announcing for a second time that the bidding stood at three hundred and seventy pounds and was with the lady on his right. He watched without interest Purbright's return to the clerk's table.

"At three hundred and seventy pounds..." Mr Harrap rolled the words around his mouth with valedictory relish. "For the third time..." The gavel was held high.

Four more seconds went by. Mr Harrap stared invitingly but quite without avail at Mr Clapper Buxton, who appeared suddenly to have gone into a state of deep inner contemplation.

The gavel descended and was held out to indicate the victor. Mr Harrap gave Mrs Moldham-Clegg a respectful, tight-mouthed smile. She did not look at him, but instead crooked one finger to summon the porter while she reached down with her other hand for a huge square shopping-bag of plaited leather.

The auctioneer coughed apologetically and leaned out of his stand to make a counter-gesture to the porter.

Mrs Moldham-Clegg paused, looked up sharply at Harrap.

Again he tried out a smile. "With respect to lot thirty-four..."

"Well?" She regarded him with chilly discouragement.

"The items cannot be released immediately, I'm afraid. There are certain formalities." He added in a whisper, "Police routine, nothing more."

If Purbright was dismayed by the ineptness of Mr Harrap as a soother of customers, he was even less prepared for Mrs Moldham-Clegg's reaction.

Allowing her head to roll back, she opened her mouth, turned up her eyes, assumed the colour of wallpaper paste, and half-slid, half-rolled in a dead faint to the floor.

Chapter Three

The silver-haired chief constable of Flaxborough, Mr Harcourt Chubb, was sufficiently old-fashioned to hold fainting to be a natural prerogative of womankind. It was "rather nice", he considered, for sensitivity to be so highly developed. Dogs were much the same: the better the pedigree, the greater the propensity to have fits.

Even Mr Chubb, though, was incredulous on hearing of the collapse of Mrs Moldham-Clegg.

"Tough as boots, I would have thought, Mr Purbright. A bit of a thruster in her time."

“How old is she now, sir?”

Mr Chubb gave the question unhurried thought. He was standing by the window in his cool, white-painted office at the Fen Street police headquarters, calmly but systematically examining, leaf by leaf, a very healthy-looking potted geranium.

“Seventy-eight, I should say,” he said at last. A little later, and with a trace of a smile that Purbright suspected was meant to be roguish for his benefit, “I expect you wonder how I know that?”

“Sir?”

Mr Chubb flicked an alien insect from one of the leaves of his plant. “Nicky Moldham had her coming-of-age party in the same year that my father returned from India. In 1921. We were at Strawbridge then, as you know.”

The inspector knew no such thing. One of Mr Chubb’s devices for implanting in his subordinates a healthy sense of inadequacy was to drop into the conversation from time to time an apparently innocent presumption of the other person’s familiarity with some matter of which he could have known nothing.

“Strawbridge,” Purbright echoed without hint of hesitancy. “Of course. It must have been quite a party for it to be so memorable.”

Mr Chubb regarded him carefully. “So my parents told me in somewhat later years. It was remembered by their generation as one of the last of the big occasions at the Hall.”

“The Moldhams seem to be considered a rather unlucky family, sir.”

“Indeed? Yes, well, I suppose they have had their troubles.”

“If they were financial troubles, it seems a little strange that one of them can now afford to pay nearly four hundred pounds for a few worthless bits and pieces at a sale.”

“Worthless?” Mr Chubb repeated, reflectively. “On the face of it, yes. But sentiment will exact a very high price, you know.”

Purbright recognized that Mr Chubb was in that frame of mind which would prove obstructive, perhaps even dictatorial, in the face of novelty or radicalism. Loyalties—the more difficult to identify because they were ancient and private loyalties—had been stirred and were now at work behind those courteous, ascetic features.

“I shall not put Mrs Moldham-Clegg to the bother of coming into town again, of course, sir.”

The chief constable nodded and wrinkled his nose. “Quite.”

“I shall give her time to recover, then have a word with her at home.”

Mr Chubb blew gently through pouted lips while he stared out of the window into the middle distance. The inspector watched and waited for him to try something in the nature of discouragement. At

the moment when he saw Mr Chubb about to speak, he broke the silence himself instead.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have been forgetting the matter you're most concerned about. The hospital people told me a little while ago that Sergeant Love is making a good recovery from that attack."

"Ah... Oh, splendid," declared Mr Chubb. He looked, the inspector thought, slightly winded, but he soon recovered from the reminder that inspectors of police, even in Flaxborough, are expected to put crime before social obligation to the County.

"There must be no effort spared to find that fellow," he said sternly. "I don't want you to feel inhibited in your investigations, you know, Mr Purbright. People like the Moldhams are very understanding if they're approached properly."

He nodded pleasantly and walked to the door like a host.

"Mind you," Mr Chubb murmured as Purbright passed him into the corridor, "Nicky is getting on a bit. Wouldn't be nice to press her too hard."

"Nicky?"

"Short for Veronica. Mrs Moldham-Clegg."

"I see, sir."

"And please see that my best wishes for his recovery go to Sergeant Love, won't you."

Purbright made his way to the CID room. It compared with Mr Chubb's office not as a poor relation with a rich, but rather as a railway waiting-room might offer contrast with an abbot's private study. It had recently been painted what Mr Chubb's wife termed "a cheerful, sunny colour" and the more rickety chairs had been replaced with plastic indestructibles, but the long, heavy wooden table, pocked with cigarette burns, still occupied most of its area and, together with a massive, black-leaded cast-iron fireplace that never contained a fire, kept faith with the days of the lock-up and the drunkards' cart. It was the kind of room in which men are disinclined to take off their overcoats. Beneath the fume of the cheerful new paint there lingered the smells of tea-soaked biscuits and of metal polish.

"Those prints. They've got a result."

A sheet of paper was handed to Purbright by PC Braine, whose fat, purse-like face and short sight gave him a quite extraordinary resemblance to a spectacled toad. Purbright thanked him and sat down. Braine went over to where Detective Pook stood drinking a mug of tea. "Villain from the Smoke, apparently," said Braine. Pook stared irritably into the steam from his drink. "Fancy that."

Detective Harper was in the room. Also PC Wilkinson and Patrolman Brevitt. All looked as if they were on their way to somewhere else.

A little self-consciously, the inspector donned a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses, recently acquired. He felt like the tutor of an adult education class.

Voices were raised outside. The door opened. Harper, who was standing facing it from the other side of the room, made noises of boisterous surprise.

The arrival was Sergeant Love. He grinned apologetically.

Purbright looked pleased to see him.

"An appropriately-timed revival, Sid. I have just learned the name of your suspected assailant."

Love took a seat opposite the inspector and assumed an attentive expression.

"He is a London gentleman," Purbright began, "whose name when last sentenced was Dean Francis O'Dwyer. He is otherwise variously known as Charles Chubb," (there were appreciative whinneys for this piece of *lèse-majesté*) "Victor Henry Scoggins, Victor Charles Priest and 'Slopey' Cavendish."

"Which one hit you, sergeant?" interjected Wilkinson, who was inclined to regard any assembly of more than three of his colleagues as an occasion for waggishness.

Love's face glowed with the pleasure of notoriety as he tenderly touched the back of his neck. "All of them, by the feel of it." It was, as he told his young lady afterwards, his *bon*est *mot* for months.

For a moment Purbright regarded him anxiously. Then he resumed his summary of Mr O'Dwyer's record.

"Last known address was in Finchley, North London. Age forty-seven. Married. Also several partners, believed bigamously acquired but never the subject of proceedings. Sent to borstal in 1948 for breaking and entering, theft and causing actual bodily harm. Convictions as an adult include four of violence, three of breaking and entering and eight of theft. His attempted larceny of a chalice was treated as sacrilege, for which he received two years."

"It sounds," commented Detective Constable Harper, infected by Wilkinson's levity, "as if the sergeant was laid out by a real professional."

Purbright had been reading ahead quickly and silently. He shook his head. "Habitual, perhaps, but not terribly successful, it seems. Slick but careless. Small takings, usually recovered. Not worth all that prison, one might have thought."

"What about the violence, though, sir?" asked the patrolman, Brevitt.

"Four cases are listed, as I said. And quite gratuitious violence, by all accounts. So whatever we may think of Mr O'Dwyer as a master criminal, he obviously is a dangerous fellow with an unpredictable

temper."

The inspector played a moment with his new glasses.

"I shall ask London to collect him for questioning if he does surface there, of course. There is a chance, though, that he has not yet left Flaxborough."

There were glances of surprise. Pook took his cue. "The inspector's talking about a car we're checking on," he explained. "It was parked overnight on the Northway Estate and nobody round there knows who it belongs to, but what we do know is that PC Phillips saw somebody get into a very similar car outside the saleroom yesterday, that somebody being the character we're after. Right, sir?"

The inspector confirmed that such, indeed, was the case.

"The general instruction at the moment," he said, "is that every officer on duty should be watchful for this man, whatever his name, and prepared for him to be violent, despite his appearance, which I can vouch for being amiable to a point of simple-mindedness. Mr Braine—run off some copies of the official description, will you, and see to their distribution."

Beckoning Love to accompany him, Purbright left the room and crossed to where a spiral of steep, narrow and noisy iron stairs led to his own office.

"Feeling better now, Sid?"

The sergeant said yes, oh yes, fine. As if to bear witness to his restored physique, the staircase swayed and rattled like a skein of iron plates.

"I didn't say anything about it downstairs," Purbright said quietly when Love had finished his climb and stood beside him, "but my belief is that Mr O'Dwyer is very seriously concerned indeed to lay hands on something that was on that tray of rubbish. He stayed with the bidding into the three hundreds."

Disbelief creased Love's face. "Three *hundred*? *Pounds*?"

"It went to nearly four, actually."

"Who got it, then?"

Purbright pushed open his office door and stood aside for Love to enter. "I did."

The tray was on a small deal table close to the desk. The sergeant stared at the cottage so lately coveted by himself, then at Purbright.

"You could say that it is an exhibit in custody," the inspector explained. "The owner, strictly speaking, is Mrs Moldham-Clegg. Her's was the top bid."

"Must be barmy," declared Love, then, defensively and a little sadly: "I thought I'd go to a couple of quid perhaps. No more."

"We can't keep these long. Unless something in this lot can be proved stolen or to have associations of some kind with an actual

crime, we shall have to pack it all off to Moldham Hall and tug our forelocks in contrition."

Love was holding the meat mincer and scraping with a thumb nail the black impacted kitchen grease on its handle. "There was a case once of gold being melted down and cast in some shape that wouldn't be noticed."

Purbright picked up the china dish and cover. The dish had inside it a perforated false bottom on which a tablet of soap could drain. He lifted it.

"Drugs?" Irrepressible Love.

"A nice thought, Sid, but I scarcely think so. I must ask around and see if soap dishes are attracting fancy prices. What do you make of the glass stoppers?"

The sergeant considered. "They look as if they're out of vinegar bottles." A pause. "Big vinegar bottles."

The inspector gave the LMS refreshment room tumbler fond but brief regard and prepared to examine carefully the plaster model of the cottage "At the End of Life's Lane".

The frame was a simple, mass-produced plastic affair, clipped to the plaster plaque at four places. It was corded for hanging.

The plaque itself was solid—or it seemed so—and the back had the slightly bubbled surface characteristic of a plaster that has set rapidly and freely exposed to air. Purbright could see no marks of identification.

With the handle of a small penknife, he tapped gently over the whole area of the picture's back, after unclipping and removing the frame. There came the same dull response at every point. If a hollow place existed, it would need to be small and deep-set.

"Micro-film?" Love threw in, heroically.

Purbright turned the plaque over. The cottage was delineated in relief. A mould, probably of rubber, must have been used. The colouring was conventional; neatly executed but nothing more.

"Have you seen this sort of thing before, Sid?"

The sergeant thought he had. At least, he had seen a kit in a shop but had not realized its connection with real art. "Kastaplak" it had been called.

For two or three minutes more, Purbright made close inspection of the plaque. He squeezed it between fingers and thumb, shook it and tapped it close to his ear, made several discreet incisions with the smallest blade of his knife and even pared away one corner that would be concealed by the replacement of the frame.

"We'll let Forensic play with it for a day," Purbright said at last. "Perhaps they will find what makes it worth £400."

Later, he was conveying the same intention in rather different

phraseology to Mr Richard Loughbury, solicitor, of Church Close, Flaxborough.

"Rich Dick" Loughbury was the senior, and only generally visible, member of Loughbury, Lovelace and Partners. He occupied a room of such generous size and gracious proportions as to take up the entire first floor of the Georgian terrace house that once had accommodated a succession of clergymen, their large families and retinues of curates. The firm's offices, in a workaday sense, were on the ground floor. Into them were crammed three desks, two typewriters, a duplicating machine, some dozens of black japanned deed boxes, a sink, kettle, cups and saucers, a wooden filing cupboard, two women wearing woollen jumpers, a box of coal, and Mr Clapper Buxton, Loughbury's confidential clerk. The two partners, neither of whom was called Lovelace, had rooms on the second floor where they were believed to do conveyancing.

Purbright had summarized for Loughbury's benefit the events of the previous day. "You do act, I understand, for the Moldham family?"

"I am Colonel Moldham's man of business." Loughbury pronounced it busy-ness: the word, like the phrase, bespoke the old-time lawyer (or else, Purbright reflected, somebody anxious to sound like one).

"And Mrs Moldham-Clegg...?"

"Is the colonel's aunt. She is widowed and lives now at the Hall." The replies came smoothly and without hesitation in a pleasant voice that had been trained carefully, perhaps self-consciously, on the base of a fairly expensive education. Rich Dick's was not a big firm even by Flaxborough standards, but Purbright could well understand why it had come to be entrusted with the affairs of most of the county families and big land-owning interests.

"The reason for my coming to you," the inspector said, "is a hope that we can clear up a little mystery connected with yesterday's sale without having to bother the lady so soon after her collapse."

"Collapse?" Mr Loughbury, whose large, square, pink face, with its laundered-looking white moustache and eyebrows, proclaimed his own robust health, clearly assumed a similarly sensible constitution on the part of his clients.

"Oh, yes, she did faint," Purbright insisted.

"Indeed. And the little mystery?"

"We should like to know why Mrs Moldham-Clegg bid close on four hundred pounds for a very ordinary household picture on plaster-of-Paris, together with three or four odds and ends, the total value of which cannot be more than a few shillings."

Mr Loughbury smiled. His teeth looked as good as the moustache. "We live in an age of inexplicable prices, inspector. Especially where

so-called art is concerned. And who are we men to tell the ladies they are extravagant?"

As Purbright was to observe to Mr Chubb later, jocularity on the part of a solicitor is one of the surest signs of evasiveness. He decided to tighten his questioning at the risk of Mr Loughbury's displeasure.

"I should have described her buy as something more than extravagance, sir. It smacks of either extreme eccentricity or of special knowledge. And Mrs Moldham-Clegg is, by all accounts, a very level-headed lady."

"What do you mean by special knowledge, inspector?" The voice was good-humoured as ever, the white brows a little lowered in friendly concern.

"I mean awareness of something valuable in lot thirty-four, something that would escape notice in the ordinary way. Something concealed, even."

"Ah, the painted-over Van Dyke." Mr Loughbury laughed, but not derisively. "No, no, I do see what you mean, Purbright—but Mrs Moldham-Clegg? Hardly a hunter of masterpieces."

"She is your client, sir..."

A finger rose in polite correction. "The family, inspector—the family is my client."

"Very well, sir; from your knowledge of the family, including Mrs Moldham-Clegg, can you suggest what significance she saw in those seemingly worthless objects that persuaded her to part with nearly £400?"

"Do you intend to put that question to her?"

"As part of my general inquiries? Yes, if necessary."

"But inquiries into what, inspector? Buying at auction is not a felonious act, surely."

"I have not suggested that it is."

The solicitor remained silent for some seconds, as though slightly discomfited and regretful that the policeman had introduced a note of asperity into his last reply. Then he brightened.

"May I make this suggestion, inspector—that I have a word myself with the good lady. It happens that I am going over to Moldham tomorrow morning to discuss some estate matters with the colonel. I'm sure that Mrs Moldham-Clegg will be as frank with me as the circumstances warrant—perhaps even a little more so, who knows?" A glint of good-fellowship in the clear, pale blue eyes, and a reassuring tightening of jaw that puckered the smooth chin.

Mr Loughbury watched the very faint, sad smile the inspector had assumed and mistook it for a sign of assent. He rose and held forth his hand.

Purbright took the hand, which was large, warm, smooth and

confident.

He had said nothing about the presence at the sale of Loughbury's confidential clerk, George Robert Buxton.

Chapter Four

Inspector Purbright did not doubt that Mrs Moldham-Clegg's man of business would telephone her long before he, Purbright, could call upon her in person. That could not be helped. He set off towards Moldham village at such speed as was still possible in his ageing official car.

The Hall was in open country a little west of the village, which the shrinkage of the agricultural population during the past twenty years had reduced to a handful of houses now refashioned to the taste of commuting businessmen and shopkeepers from Flaxborough who had acquired them. There was no store in the village, no post office, no inn. The tiny church, fussily restored by a Victorian architect with the money of farmers whose personal piety embraced a desire to see the virtue of humility inculcated in their labourers, was open for services only half a dozen times a year, when the dank and dim little stone box held all too easily a congregation garnered by bus from ten square miles of indifferent countryside.

As Purbright drove by, he saw sheep grazing in the churchyard. One, framed against the black hollow of the porch, held itself very erect and gave Purbright a direct stare of disapproval and challenge. He thought of Mrs Moldham-Clegg.

The Hall's surrounding parkland had a common boundary with the church, to which a private path still led. The inspector could just discern the glimmer of the white wicket gate between two yew trees. The house was invisible from the road until he reached the entrance to a drive flanked with chestnuts and sycamores, at the end of which and looking much smaller than such an approach promised, was a square, two-storeyed building in dark, rusticated stone. It could have been a moorland farmhouse, save for its battlemented parapet—an addition conceived by a nineteenth century Moldham whom a hunting accident had led to a brief but influential incursion into the works of Sir Walter Scott.

A pair of tall wrought-iron gates stood across the drive. Mainly rusty now, they bore vestiges of black and gold paint. Purbright decided that to leave the car outside them and walk to the Hall would be easier than involvement with bolts and catches of dubious efficacy. He also decided that a painted notice, *Private—tradesmen next*

entrance, was not intended to apply to him.

He took his time to walk the length of the avenue, savouring the scents of cow parsley and meadowsweet and the underlying spiciness of mouldering leaves. Greenery had made broad inroads across the gravel, so that his steps were carpeted almost to silence. Thus he was only a few yards short of the corner of the house when an old man busy at a window in the side wall heard him and peered round over his shoulder.

"Ah," said the old man. He had short, grizzled thatch on his nearly flat head, a little more around his chin. He wore blue knitted mittens, with the back of which he wiped from time to time a nose of considerable size and bulbosity.

Purbright Ah'd a return greeting. The old man resumed his task, but not dismissively. After a while he said that it looked like being a nice day.

Purbright watched him running a knife around the edge of a window pane and catching the snake of surplus putty in his other hand. On a sheet of newspaper spread beside him were shards of glass.

"Terrible price, now, glass," offered the inspector.

There came from the old man a husky blowing noise, signifying unqualified agreement.

Purbright waited a while. Then, with immense casualness: "Not in a place you'd expect it to get broken."

The old man licked his little finger and carefully smoothed away a blemish in the new putty.

"Didn't," he said.

"Didn't get broken?"

"They niwer brok it. I brok it. They cut it."

The old man spoke without a halt in the slow, patient perfecting of the setting of the new pane. Purbright looked at the pile of glass on the ground. He saw one piece whose edge conformed to the arc of a circle.

"You mean," he said, "that you had to smash the glass because there was a hole in it?"

"Ah."

"I see."

"It was the burglars as cut it."

With which slow, matter-of-fact statement of the obvious, the old man returned his knife to a tool-bag, an open leather pouch, and squatted back to survey his work.

"When was that, then?" Purbright asked.

"What, the burglars?"

"Aye."

"In the night, they reckon."

"Anyone told the police?" The inspector sounded as if the question was of but the slightest interest.

"Bound to 'ave. Well, he's a magistrate, an't 'ee?"

"The colonel? Yes, I believe so."

The old man thought a moment. A slow grin. "That buglar'd larf all right if 'ee come up in front of Mester."

Purbright smiled back, bade him goodbye and hastened to the corner. This suddenness of departure was in response to a reflection that the term "Mester" was unlikely to have been used by an odd jobs man summoned from elsewhere. And if the old man was one of whatever permanent staff the family could still afford, his usefulness as an informant would not survive his being seen in close company with a policeman.

The front door was slightly ajar. It was a big panelled door and had been painted dark green a long time ago. Now the paint was just dark. It was lustreless and had split away in the corners of the panels. Against this shabbiness, the shine of the heavy, ring-shaped brass knocker testified to regular polishing. Purbright raised and let it fall twice. The house sounded empty.

After a while he heard an unhurried approaching footfall, but not from within. He turned.

"Yes?"

Colonel Brace Pendamon Moldham, a tall, stringy, brownish man in a rugged-down tweed hat the colour of lichens, was standing on the gravel a few yards away. The twelve-bore couched from armpit to forearm looked as if it had grown there. He had an exactly rectangular black moustache, high cheekbones and soft brown eyes that hardly ever moved.

Purbright wished him good morning and announced his identity.

Colonel Moldham acknowledged the former with the slightest of nods but appeared totally unimpressed by the latter.

"I should like to speak to Mrs Moldham-Clegg for a moment or two, if that would be convenient."

"About what, pray?" The tone was not hostile, but sounded a note of formal discouragement as if to give notice that one's present suppliers were satisfactory, thank you, and one did not buy at the door in any case.

Purbright said: "I am making inquiries concerning an attack upon one of my officers yesterday morning, sir. It took place in an auction room and I have reason to believe that there may be some connection between the assault and certain articles that were subsequently sold-by pure coincidence, no doubt-to Mrs Moldham-Clegg."

The colonel regarded Purbright in silence and without altering his stance. Five seconds went by. The inspector began to think that this

was some kind of freezing tactic. He spoke again.

"Does Mrs Moldham-Clegg happen to be at home, sir? This matter need not take up much of her time."

Colonel Moldham leaned forward and turned his head by a fraction. "Purbright, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

A nod of endorsement. "Yes, well, Purbright, I'm not at all sure, you know, that aunt can see you. She's been a bit off colour." A pause, then, stockily: "You see?"

Purbright smiled pleasantly. "That precisely is why I have come, sir. I wish to be able to release her property without putting her to the trouble of travelling to town to answer questions."

"Release her property," the colonel repeated half to himself, as though doubting the commission of so audacious an act as distraint, however temporary, upon anything belonging to a member of the Moldham family. He frowned, then smiled with half his mouth. "I don't quite follow, Purbright."

At that moment the old man who had been mending the window appeared from round the corner. Colonel Moldham at once stepped forward and pushed open the door. "Perhaps we had better go inside."

The inspector found himself in a dark hall, from which two arched corridors ran left and right. The stone floor was bare except for the strip of well-worn matting that crossed from one corridor to the other. The walls were in part plaster, in part big wooden panels deeply buried in greenish-grey paint. He saw a chest, similarly painted, and a grandfather clock in a black timber case; its dark, cracked face and faded numerals offered little in the matter of time-telling, but the pendulum swung still and the "glunk" of its escapement echoed irregularly through the damp air like the beat of an old and much battered heart.

The hall smelled of mould, of burning pine cones and of dog.

A door was being held open by the colonel. Purbright entered the light, airy room beyond and was dazed for a moment by reflections of incoming sunshine in the white painted panels of tall, deep window embrasures and in the glassy surface of an oval table that looked nearly half as big as the room itself.

Until he realized that the colonel was addressing someone other than himself, he did not see Mrs Moldham-Clegg. She was seated in one of the two tapestry-covered wing chairs near the fireplace, her head bent forward in concentration.

"This gentleman is a police" (he pronounced it "pleess") "inspector, aunt. He says he would like to ask you some questions. Do you wish him to ask you some questions?"

Purbright made a small bow in her direction and bade her good

morning. He found interesting the colonel's manner of introduction: the Moldhams clearly considered co-operation with the law to be like paying bills, a matter of patronage.

There came from the direction of the chair a faint "pop". Mrs Moldham-Clegg was shelling peas.

Three pops later, she spoke.

"If the gentleman is a policeman why does he not wear a uniform?"

"It's all right, aunt. I know Mr Purbright. He is a detective inspector from Flaxborough."

Another soft pea-pod explosion and the sound of the peas cascading briefly against the side of a colander. "Purbright?" murmured Mrs Moldham-Clegg, as if tasting the name. "You wouldn't be... No, I suppose you wouldn't."

"No, no; not from Dorset, if that's what you're thinking of," said the colonel, brusquely. "He wishes to ask you something." Turning to the inspector, "Now then, what was it you wished to ask, Mr Purbright?"

Purbright resisted the temptation to reply *For a chair*; his host seemed to assume in others his own perpetual preference for standing.

"I trust you are feeling better now, ma'am."

She glanced up suspiciously. "Yes, thank you."

He went on: "I'm sorry that yesterday's sale provided such unwelcome excitement, but..."

"I fainted, Mr Purbright, by reason of the heat in the auction room. For no other cause."

"Of course. But it must have been annoying after all those bids to have your purchase taken into custody, as it were."

"Very annoying, naturally. Quite frankly, it struck one as a most high-handed piece of behaviour."

Mrs Moldham-Clegg took another pea pod from a basket on the floor beside her. She scowled across at her nephew.

"Bruce, Mr Purbright is looming. Kindly bring him a chair or something. I cannot see when people loom."

The colonel looked about him as if he did not know what a chair was. Purbright withdrew a little and also glanced around. For a fraction of a second he allowed his attention to be claimed by something on the further side of the room.

Beside the keyhole in the red-brown lid of a small rosewood bureau was a splintered eruption of veneer.

Colonel Moldham, who had shed the gun at last, pulled forward a Victorian carving chair. "This do?" He himself remained standing, gauntly watchful, close to the window and to his propped-up gun.

"I should tell you at the outset, perhaps," Purbright resumed from

his more lowly position, “that a serious assault was made upon a detective sergeant at the back of the hall just before the sale began. We believe that there may be some connection between the attacker and the articles for which you, ma’am, successfully bid.”

“That,” declared Mrs Moldham-Clegg, “is perfectly ridiculous.”

“Not perfectly, I’m afraid. For one thing, the sergeant was examining that particular lot when he was attacked. For another, we believe his assailant was one of the bidders when the same articles were put up for auction.”

The old woman gouged open another pod and thumbed forth its peas. “I really do not understand what you hope to gain from these fanciful connections you have seen fit to make. I am sorry, naturally, for this officer who has been hurt. But I am not responsible. Why should I be deprived of my property? Are there not enough thieves for you to track down that you harass decent people who have paid for what they possess—or, indeed” (and here Mrs Moldham-Clegg gave a creamy, mirthless laugh) “what the police will not allow them to possess?”

“Oh, come now, aunt,” the colonel began, then thought better of intervening.

Purbright met the old woman’s eye steadily.

“There is no shortage of thieves, Mrs Moldham-Clegg, nor of thefts. That is why we are intrigued by any instance of a price that is mysteriously low—or high.”

“Are you implying, Mr Inspector, that I am some sort of trafficker in stolen goods?”

“Not at all. I’ve no doubt that you are a bona fide purchaser. It is the purchase that I find puzzling. I do respectfully suggest”—and here Purbright turned as if to invite the arbitration of the colonel—“that much trouble would be saved if you would offer a simple explanation of why you considered it worth offering £370 for lot number thirty-four.”

Mrs Moldham-Clegg paid tight-faced attention to the next pod.

It was her nephew who spoke, after thoughtfully stroking his cheek.

“I’m not sure, you know, that you’re on good ground legally, Purbright. I mean, this business of your right to deprive somebody of what has been bought in good faith.”

“Not necessarily permanently, sir,” amended Purbright.

“Yes, well, even so...”

“Your solicitor does know about our inquiries, incidentally, colonel. I’m confident he will advise you concerning the legality of our...”

The inspector’s brief hesitation over a choice of word allowed Mrs

Moldham-Clegg bitterly to supply her own.

"Seizure..."

There was a pause, not an easy one. Neither the colonel nor his aunt followed up the reference to Loughbury. His surmise had been right, Purbright reflected: Rich Dick had wasted no time.

"Can I not persuade you, ma'am, to answer my question?"

Mrs Moldham-Clegg sighed, set her features in a smile of cold patience and rocked a little from side to side as she said: "My dear man, I really cannot understand why you go on so. I'm sorry, but I prefer to regard the matter as a strictly private transaction, and that is the end of it. Now would you like me to have Alice bring you a cup of coffee?"

"Yes," said Purbright, "I should like that very much."

For a moment Mrs Moldham-Clegg sat motionless, staring at him. The inspector gazed back with an expression of genial innocence. She swallowed and looked past him at the colonel.

"Brace—would you mind?" Her voice was restrained, cross.

The colonel shrugged and ambled off. Purbright watched him walk past the rosewood bureau.

"What a pity," he said, when the colonel had gone, "that such a nice piece of furniture should get damaged."

Mrs Moldham-Clegg had resumed her pea-podding. "Do you often come into the country, Mr Purbright?" she inquired evenly.

"Not as often as I would wish, ma'am. The only occasions nowadays, I'm afraid, are afforded by crime of some kind. House-breakings, mainly."

"Your work must be very interesting." Mrs Moldham-Clegg's tone succeeded in making the job of a detective inspector sound like the management of a massage parlour.

"It consists substantially of exercising patience."

She nodded. "A primary virtue. We were taught a lot of it when I was a girl." The word came out as *gairl*.

The cup of coffee arrived after about five more minutes. It was borne on a round, painted metal tray, not by a domestic but by Colonel Moldham himself, looking lamentably unused to the task. He set the tray down at one end of the big oval table and stared at it for a while, as if making a count.

Mrs Moldham-Clegg gestured the inspector to help himself.

"Mrs Anstead was busy with something or other," the colonel informed his aunt. He went back to his place by the window and lapsed into an unfocused stare.

Purbright stirred the coffee. Irregular reddish-brown patches on the surface proclaimed its having been made from a concentrate. Cup and saucer were of fine quality china, heavily decorated with

cornflowers. On a second saucer were two Bath Oliver biscuits. They were damp. The coffee tasted of salted peanuts.

"If you would like to smoke," said Mrs Moldham-Clegg, "please do so, but you must not mind if we cannot provide any of the paraphernalia." She looked across to the colonel. "Although I suppose there could be an ashtray in the coachhouse: was Herriot a smoking person? I really can't remember."

The inspector assured her that he himself had long since ceased to smoke, then addressed himself to Colonel Moldham.

"I was remarking just now, sir, what a shame it is that so fine a little bureau should get damaged."

"Bureau? Oh, that. Yes. Looks rather bad, but one doesn't think at the time."

"Think what, sir?"

The old woman spoke. "There's a little man in town does these things. He's really very good."

"Ah, you had to force the lock yourself, did you, sir? That must have been quite a heart-breaking decision."

The colonel shrugged. He looked bored. "When one mislays the only key, one hasn't much choice. Not with a fellow waiting at the door for one's cheque."

Purbright grimaced sympathetically, sipped his coffee, then subjected the bureau to a speculative stare.

"Do you not think your glazier might repair it?"

"Glazier?" The colonel looked puzzled.

"The gentleman mending a window round the side of the house. I noticed he had a bag of very professional-looking tools."

The colonel and Mrs Moldham-Clegg looked at each other. She frowned at her nephew. "Benton, does he mean?"

"He's my gardener," said the colonel. "Odd jobs, that sort of thing. Very useful chap. Not exactly a furniture restorer, though, one would have thought." "Hardly," agreed the aunt. The exchange was obviously for Purbright's benefit but neither looked away from the other while it went on.

Purbright put down his cup.

"How did that window get broken, colonel?"

"My dear fellow..." Colonel Moldham's lean face once again stretched into the lop-sided contours of false amusement, like that of a man with a slight stroke. "How *does* a window get broken? Children... Careless servants..."

Mrs Moldham-Clegg had finished shelling peas. She smoothed level those in the colander and put it on the table. She, too, was smiling wryly.

"If you would care for more coffee, Mr Purbright...?"

Purbright rose, shook his head, and made a small bow. He walked straight to the bureau and knelt before it. Around its lock an area of about the size of a playing card was ruptured and splintered. Marks suggested that a chisel or broad screwdriver had been used to lever open the lid. The surrounding surface appeared to have been wiped.

Getting to his feet, the inspector strolled back towards the colonel.

"I'm sorry, sir, but nothing is going to persuade me that the owner of an attractive and, no doubt, valuable article such as that is would perpetrate so crude an assault upon it, however pressing the occasion."

It was as though Purbright had not spoken. The colonel, blank-faced, addressed his aunt: "I have to go over to Gosby with that saddle I promised Mallory. Tell Benson to see to the melon house door, will you? He knows about it."

The old woman quitted her chair. Purbright saw now that she was wearing trousers. They were of crumpled cavalry twill. In the loose grey cardigan that covered a blouse and a purple silk scarf knotted at her throat was a brooch, an enamelled miniature of a spray of roses, set in heavy gold.

"It was good of you to call, Mr Inspector," she said, not looking at him but busying herself with collecting colander and spent pods.

The door was being held open by the colonel.

"Give you a lift, Purbright?"

"That's very good of you, sir." The inspector passed by him into the half-light of the hall. "I do happen to have my own transport."

"Splendid," murmured the colonel, flatly. He remained standing on the porch step, legs a little apart, gun cradled once more within his arm, staring mildly at no part in particular of the Moldham family acres.

Chapter Five

When Purbright reached the corner of the house, he looked round it to see if Benton, the odd-jobs man, were still about, but there was no sign of him. The inspector followed with his eye the gravel path, a broad spur from the main drive, which continued past where Benton had been mending the window. It led to the back of the house. There, presumably, would be found the coachhouse to which Mrs Moldham-Clegg had referred.

Purbright decided to have a look. Herriott—whoever he was—had been mentioned in a way that suggested he had lived in the

building. Was it still in occupation by somebody—Benton, perhaps? Or the Mrs Anstead who had been too busy to make coffee?

Somewhere not far away, dogs were barking sporadically. He halted. The colonel's voice reached him, raised in command. Then silence, followed by the sound of a car being started against its will. Purbright glanced about for cover, then remembered the overgrown gravel and the latched and rusty gates; the colonel was not likely to use *that* way as an exit. He remained where he was. Gradually the noise of the car diminished to a distant grumble. An old and large car, he decided, not very well maintained.

The coachhouse was revealed as soon as Purbright drew level with the back of the house. It formed the further side of a walled and flagstoned court and consisted of three arched carriage bays and an upper storey. This was reached by an outside staircase on the gable end. There were two small windows in the upper wall, both curtained.

One bay, in the rear of which Purbright could discern a bench, tools and an oil drum, obviously served as a garage. In another was a stack of shallow wooden boxes, some piles of neatly folded sacks, an old motor-driven mower and a number of gardening tools hanging from nails. There was movement, also. Into the light emerged Benton. He was unravelling what looked like a screwed up piece of cloth. Purbright heard a door open, not far away. He drew close to the wall.

"Benton, you'll not forget the melon house, will you?"

The old man neither looked up nor spoke. His only acknowledgement of Mrs Moldham-Clegg's instruction was a non-committal flap of the hand.

The door slammed shut.

Benton continued slowly to cross the court towards the inspector, whom he gave no sign of having seen. He was so preoccupied that twice he nearly lost his footing on the slimy mosses that covered some of the flagstones.

When he did look up and see Purbright, by then only two or three feet in front of him, he observed merely: "Ah, y'aint gone yit, then." He spread and held aloft what he had been holding, and added: "Dunno what you think but I reckon 'ee winged the bugger."

"What bugger?" responded Purbright, cosily. He was careful not to appear impressed by the blood that had soaked into Mr Benton's exhibit.

"That burglar, o' course. I thought I heard 'im loose off two barrels."

"Wake you up, did it?"

Benton chuckled wheezily. "Wok me up, d'y' say? Y'can't wok up a chap as dunt sleep, mate."

"No, I suppose you can't."

"If I git two hours a night, it's plenty. Plenty, that is. Sleepin's nowt but bein' dead on account."

"Ah," said Purbright, in a way that the old man seemed to accept as marking the approval of a fellow-insomniac, for he opened a door in the courtyard wall and companionably ushered the inspector through.

"Old Knickers wuz on about the melanus. 'Ear 'er, did you?"

Purbright translated "melanus" easily enough: they had emerged beside a lean-to glasshouse containing vine-like plants. The epithet for Mrs Moldham-Clegg surprised him, though. Mr Benton he had supposed to be something in the old retainer line and not given to such brashly disrespectful references. " 'Knickers'?"

"Har. Veronica. Nicky, she gits from family 'n 'er county friends." The old man looked up, craftily. "You 'adn't nivver 'eerd 'er called Knickers, then?"

"No, I don't think I have."

"Har." For several seconds, Mr Benton gazed into the distance nostalgically, before meeting Purbright's eye again with his own, which he then slowly closed.

"What would you say, mester, if somebody wuz to tell you that there wunce wuz a time when Nicky Moldham wuz a thruster an' a cum-onner? A lot o' yeers, mind. When they still 'ad munny. Aye, b'God, that 'un liked 'er stick, nivver you fret."

Allowing his eyes to grow large, Purbright nodded, lips compressed, in token both of his belief and his discretion. He hoped, though, that Benton had not forgotten about the burglary.

"Mind you don't get any of that blood on your jacket," he said as a reminder.

Benton shook his head. "Dry," he said. "Must 'a bin there all night a'most."

"You heard the shots fairly early on, then," remarked the inspector.

Round about one o'clock, Benton reckoned. And who had fired the shotgun?—why, Squire, of course, who else?—but a bloody terrible shot was the colonel: his having drawn blood with only two barrels was nothing short of a miracle.

"It would have been dark," the inspector pointed out, in fairness to the absent marksman.

"Dark? Niwer dark in the country, onny in towns."

"True."

Purbright waited for Benton to open the melon house door. The old man bent to examine a place where it was sticking against the frame.

"I suppose," Purbright said, "that you didn't actually *see* the bloke

get shot, did you?"

Mr Benton blew noisily to signify denial. "Heerd 'im pelt off, though. Up the old carridge road as you cum in on. Heerd 'is motor start, an' all."

"From the road?"

"No—down in the yard."

"He'd driven right up to the house, then?"

"Yis. Must've done, cheeky bugger."

"Ah," said the inspector. A pause. "Funny thing, that he didn't hang on to that piece of cloth if he was trying to stop the bleeding. Where did you find it?"

"In the yard. Just by the garridge there."

"May I see?"

Benton handed him the cloth. It was a piece of thin towelling, grubby as well as bloodstained. Purbright examined it closely. Near one corner, initials had been chain-stitched in red cotton. FSSC. Flaxborough Social Services Committee.

The inspector sighed. "I really ought to have told you before, Mr Benton, that I am a policeman."

"Har, thought so," said the old man, with neither surprise nor rancour. He nodded in the direction of the house. "Anythin' took?"

"They seem a bit uncertain at the moment. It would be as well if you didn't bother them with questions for a while."

"You'll be wantin' that." The old man pointed to the towel, then sorted out a plastic bag from several on a shelf. Purbright thanked him.

Again Benton's head jerked towards the house. "Not much woth burglarizing in there, y'know. Not nowadays. Tim wuz when there wuz jools."

"Really?"

"Oh, ar. Knickers had jools up to 'er goin' to London. Green 'uns in a little string. Woth god knows how much, they reckoned."

"Went to London, did she? When was that?"

The old man pondered. "Forty yeer...no, more—she'd be in 'er early thutties, would Veronica. She went off to live with relations of 'er mam's. Titled lot, they wuz. Had the Queen's cousin to dinner wunce. Then back she cum 'ome when 'er mam died in nineteen 'n fifty."

"Wasn't she married by then, though?"

Benton took a chisel and began to pare thin shavings from the edge of the door. "Yip, but she didn't bring '*im*. O' course, 'ee wuzn't quality. Chap called Clegg. Dead now. She might 'a got some of 'is munny, but they don't reckon 'ee 'ad all that much."

The inspector was beginning to feel his role to be that of gossip

rather than interrogator. He changed the subject.

"Tell me, Mr Benton, have you ever seen a picture of a cottage over at the house? Quite a small picture—modelled—made to stand out in the frame, if you see what I mean."

The old man shook his head. The only pictures he'd ever noticed were old dark things in those great gold frames. Why—was that what the burglar had pinched?

No, said the inspector, it was just a thought. And, at once, he had another thought: would Mr Benton mind fishing out the bits of broken window from where he had put them?

"Har, fingerprints," responded the old man with knowledgeable relish. He at once abandoned carpentry, selected another plastic bag from his store and trotted off towards a bin.

Sergeant William Malley, a ponderous man of indestructible good humour, was well equipped for his duties as coroner's officer. He was kindly in manner and intent, and would rather leave a few holes in forensic orthodoxy than add officiousness to the ordeals of the bereaved. At the same time, he was shrewd and diligent to a degree that might have been thought surprising in one so fat and seemingly promotion-proof (Malley had been a sergeant for twenty-three years). These qualities, together with a certain inborn and quite inoffensive curiosity, had brought so many people within his circles of acquaintance that the sergeant served at Fen Street as a live *Who's Who* for Flaxborough and district.

Purbright was hopeful that he might have something *Debrett*ish to offer as well.

"Bill, what do you know about the Moldham family?"

Malley rubbed the side of his nose with the stem of a squat, toxic-looking pipe.

"Pretty clunch lot," he said, after deliberation.

"Yes, I got the impression they'd not give much away. And they seem to have equally reticent friends."

Malley smiled understandingly.

"There was a break-in at the Hall during the night," said Purbright. "They've a hole in a window, damage to furniture, a bloodstained rag and a gardener who heard a couple of shots—but nobody knows anything—except the gardener—he loves talking."

The sergeant nodded. "Old Benton. Aye, he'll talk, all right. You'll get nothing out of the others, though."

"I gather the colonel isn't married."

"No, him and his aunt are the only ones left, apart from cousins and things. Old Moldy, the colonel's father, died some time in the sixties, and his mother about thirty years ago. You remember old Moldy, though, don't you?"

The inspector did. The old squire had succumbed to a splendidly characteristic apoplexy on discovering that his more timid son had been paying secretly the bills which his father ("They have my custom, don't they—what more do they want?") for years had been throwing into the ancestral fireplace.

"Who was Clegg?" Purbright asked, after a while.

"Veronica's husband, you mean?"

"Yes. Not top drawer, I understand."

"Well, not by the Moldham stud book, I suppose, but probably as good as anything else she could get at short notice. He was a stockbroker or an accountant or something."

"They parted, though." Purbright again drew on Benton's saga.

Malley shook his head. "No, not really. Nothing drastic. She came home when her brother was left on his own, and Clegg carried on living in London. He used to stay at the Hall sometimes but he wasn't keen on the country."

"Now deceased?"

"So I believe."

The telephone on Purbright's desk rang. PC Braine begged to inform him that the car believed to have been abandoned by Sergeant Love's assailant was now in the yard, and that the inspector's instructions were awaited.

"I'll be down in a moment."

The inspector returned his attention to the coroner's officer. "Who's Herriott?" he asked.

"You're still talking about Moldham, are you?"

"Aye."

Malley viewed with half-closed eye the paper clip he was using as a pipe-cleaner. The wire was still emerging from each trip up the stem with a heavy black viscous coating. "Herriott," he said, "was the general dogsbody, though *they* called him the chauffeur. He took over when Whippy Arnold left."

"Which was?"

Up went the sergeant's shoulders. He evidently did not consider Moldham Hall a particularly rewarding topic. "Oh, twenty years, maybe. A long time. Nearer thirty, perhaps."

"Dead now, is he? Herriott?"

"Must be." Malley had transposed his pipe to belly level and was reaming out the bowl with a huge clasp knife. Purbright tried not to look.

"Funny we should mention Whippy, though," said the sergeant, suddenly glancing up. "They cremated the old bugger not two weeks ago."

When Purbright arrived in the yard he found Detectives Pook and

Wilkinson sitting in the front seats of a toffee-coloured Austin 1100 and intently studying a magazine. They did not notice the inspector until he leaned down and tapped the windscreen. Pook immediately thrust the magazine into his colleague's lap and opened the door on his own side. He got out with athletic haste, as if bearing dispatches from a battle.

Purbright looked past him to see Wilkinson twist round and slip the magazine among some newspapers on the back seat.

"Whole lot of good prints," announced Pook. He spread a hand in eager indication of steering wheel and facia. "All done. All in the can, sir."

"Good," said Purbright, without making it sound like praise. "What about blood?"

Pook looked bewildered. Wilkinson, who had come round to stand beside him, said: "Nobody asked about blood, sir."

Purbright did not wish Wilkinson, a mild and reasonably conscientious man, to share a reprimand with Pook, who was not only heavily armoured with self-esteem, but would doubtless find his own portion of blame as easy to pass on as a pornographic magazine, so he said merely: "Never mind, let's see if we can find any now."

They could, and did. There were smears of blood on the side of the driver's seat, on handbrake and gear lever and on the off-side door panel. A chastened Pook took swabbings.

Purbright viewed earlier discoveries. They included three one-litre cans of oil, two hammers, a roll of broad adhesive tape, a jemmy and several tyre levers, as well as a box of tools of fairly catholic usefulness, a butcher's knife and what appeared to be a shearing device with huge leverage. Bolt cutters, Pook said.

"An engagingly candid man," remarked Purbright. "He could scarcely have advertised his trade more effectively if he'd put a board up."

"There was no sign of a weapon anywhere," Wilkinson said.

Purbright shook his head. "He may not be very clever, but he's not so stupid that he can't improvise—as poor Love knows to his cost."

Wilkinson thought a moment. "But why should he have *hit* the sergeant, sir? He'd only to wait for him to go away and he could have pinched that thing he was looking at—and no bother."

The inspector shrugged. "O'Dwyer's a Londoner: he probably knows very little about auctions. Anyway, he's a bit of a thruster. Anybody pugnacious and impatient watching Mr Love evaluate a work of art might think that knocking him out was the simplest way of getting a look at it himself."

"Thruster, sir?" Wilkinson echoed, hungry for upper-rank *mots*

justes.

"Hunting expression," said Purbright, and left it at that. There seemed no point in admitting that he had first heard it himself only that day.

Chapter Six

The next morning was Saturday, the day on which the chief constable traditionally escorted his wife around the shops. It was partly duty, but Mr Chubb did not mind that. He quite enjoyed shopping, even in the huge bin-walks which had superseded so many of Flaxborough's small family concerns, in each of which, it now seemed to him, the same fresh-faced, bald, bobbing man in a white apron once had offered slivers of cheese for approval, or held up entire flitches of bacon which he would proceed to guillotine with the most cheerful prodigality at a nod from the customer, or weighed half a pound of Oval Osbornes or Bath Olivers (whole ones, no bits) from a tin that had had to be opened by riffing a blade round its sealed lid, *And the next, please...*

"Whatever next will they find to obstruct this yard?" remarked Mr Chubb of the toffee-coloured Austin. He could, with a little trouble, have manoeuvred his own Rover into its reserved space, but this was Saturday: he was entitled, surely, to some respite from coping with awkwardness on this one day. He switched off his engine and got out.

Inspector Purbright, who had been talking to the nodding auctioneer, old Hector Durham, and felt slightly less than steady in consequence, was entering the yard from Field Street. He crossed to the Rover in time to assist Mrs Chubb to alight. She gave him a motherly beam before turning to extricate from the back of the car a big straw shopping bag, which she handed to her husband.

The chief constable waved the bag towards the toffee-coloured car. "That does not belong to one of our people, does it, Mr Purbright?"

"No, sir. It was abandoned in Cherrytree Avenue by the man I think was responsible for the attack on Sergeant Love."

The chief constable stared at the Austin with sharper attention. "Stolen, I suppose. Have you checked with the licence people?"

"The car isn't stolen, as a matter of fact, sir. It is registered in the name of Chubb."

"*Chubb?*"

"Charles Chubb." Purbright's voice was very level. "It is one of

the aliases used by the man whose fingerprints were on the door knob."

"Indeed." The chief constable was silent a moment. "I think that it would be politic, Mr Purbright, if some alternative could be found. As a point of reference, so to speak."

Purbright agreed. There was Scoggins, or Priest, or Cavendish. His own favourite was Dean Francis O'Dwyer, which happened also to be the choice of the North London police who had had most to do with the man.

"Sounds like a Dublin clergyman," said Mrs Chubb, preparing to disengage. She put a hand on her husband's sleeve. "I shall just call at Wilson's for your All-Bran and then go on to the Karri-Ko. All right?" She gave the inspector a big don't-keep-him-too-long smile and departed.

The chief constable folded the shopping bag in two and put it under his arm.

"I have been talking to Mr Durham," the inspector said. "He told me something rather surprising. Lot thirty-four at Thursday's sale—which included the plaster cast picture that seems so highly thought of—was entered by the local authority. It appears to be council property, sir."

"*Our* council, you mean? Flaxborough?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very odd. Councils do not normally traffic in plaster pictures, do they? Not," Mr Chubb added, acidly, "that I would put anything past them nowadays."

"Mr Durham said he understood the welfare department was responsible. Unfortunately, there's no one available there on a Saturday."

The chief constable pouted gravely and shifted the folded shopping bag to his other arm. He said nothing.

"Oh, by the way, sir, the North London police are sending an officer to pay us a visit." Purbright sounded as if he expected Mr Chubb to be very pleased. He added: "The notification is on your desk. We didn't think you would consider it a matter to justify a call to your home on a Saturday."

"That was very considerate of you, Mr Purbright, but I cannot remember inviting a London force or any other to send a representative to Flaxborough."

"No, sir; it is on their initiative. They feel that their special knowledge of O'Dwyer may be useful to us. I also got the impression during a short telephone conversation with the superintendent that he feels responsible. O'Dwyer is supposed to report there every day. They have had a call out for him since Thursday. He sounds a pretty

troublesome person, sir."

"I should have thought that we are quite capable of dealing with troublesome people without the assistance of officers from London. In any case, why should it be assumed that the fellow is still in this neighbourhood?"

Mr Chubb's displeasure was of the quiet, subcutaneous kind. Its only outward manifestation was a little irregular tic at the corner of his mouth.

Purbright indicated the Austin. "His car, sir. He had no reason, so far as we know, to return to London without it. And without his housebreaking tools, incidentally."

Mr Chubb raised his brows.

Purbright went on: "The London superintendent also said that O'Dwyer is remarkably home-loving, considering his record. His current wife has actually reported him missing."

The tic became more obvious. Purbright tried putting a note of concern in his voice.

"They sound quite anxious, sir."

The chief constable stared coldly for several seconds at a patch of oil that was spreading from beneath the car of the errant O'Dwyer. "Indeed." He adjusted his yellow washleather gloves without losing grip of the shopping bag under his arm. "Perhaps you'll have someone see to the mess that car is making, will you, Mr Purbright?" And he set off for the Karri-Ko supermarket.

An hour later, the inspector made his way to the station in time to meet the noon train from King's Cross. He was not sure what protocol demanded on such occasions, but supposed that parity of rank would come into it somewhere. Anyway, it would hardly predispose Detective Inspector Eric Bradley to view Flaxborough favourably if the first native he encountered were to be PC Braine.

A few minutes after Purbright's departure, Mr Richard Loughbury loomed expansively at the reception counter and asked to see him, "or does he not come in on Saturdays?"

"We all come in," retorted PC Braine, sourly.

"In that case..."

"But he's gone out again."

Mr Loughbury, who really had nothing else to do, made an extravagant lever movement with his left arm in order to bring his watch to the consultation position. He appeared to see in its face an impending event of immense significance.

"Perhaps I had better have a word with his deputy. If the inspector then wishes to ask me anything, he can always make an appointment."

"Please yourself," said the accommodating Mr Braine. "Sergeant

Love's in, if you want to see him."

Rich Dick followed the route prescribed by Brain and found himself in a corridor with glossy, primrose-painted walls. The three electric bulbs that lit it were set in suspended shades of white glass like coolie hats; nothing of the kind had been seen in the offices of Loughbury, Lovelace and Partners since the 1930s. In the distance were animated voices and the clink of thick pottery. Now and again there crossed the end of the corridor an unjacketed policeman, bearing a mug of tea, who would spare Loughbury a sidelong, mistrustful glance.

Love arrived almost at once. He ushered the solicitor into a small, square, bare-walled room with two wooden chairs and a plain table. Mr Loughbury, whose avoidance on principle of anything as unremunerative as court work had left him unacquainted with the shabby austerity of police stations, was not sure whether to be sympathetic or offended.

Love spoke first. "I'll get you some tea if you like. It's mugs as a rule, but they keep a cup specially for visitors."

Mr Loughbury raised his big pink hand. "A very brief call, sergeant. My object is simply to leave an item of information—of explanation, rather—for the benefit of your superior officer."

Love frowned, as if the identity of that person were going to take some working out.

"The inspector came to see me yesterday with a little problem," Loughbury said. "It concerned an auction sale." Suddenly, the calm, excellently-maintained face came nearer and expressed anxiety. "But of course—*the* auction sale, so far as you are concerned, sergeant—*the* most unfortunate auction sale, am I not right? And how *are* the injuries? A complete recovery, I trust?"

Love blushed and said, oh, that? Well he was expected to live. His modesty earned him one of the chin-up smiles that Mr Loughbury distributed in lieu of tips.

"There was an item offered at that sale," the solicitor continued, "which attracted bids far beyond its obvious value. Mr Purbright, naturally enough, was intrigued—indeed, I might almost say suspicious—and when the subject arose in conversation at my office, he clearly hoped that I might throw some light on the incident. I represent, you see"—and Mr Loughbury leaned a little forward—"the lady who finally purchased the item."

"It was a cottage," the sergeant said.

"Ah...it was, yes; one might say so—a representation of a cottage. A poor enough thing, goodness knows, but prized by someone. By someone, you may be sure. And thereby"—Mr Loughbury raised a finger—"hangs a tale."

Love looked at the finger.

"You see," continued Mr Loughbury, "what the inspector did not know is that my man, the excellent Mr Buxton, was also present at that sale and, moreover, actually putting in bids for the said picture, plaque, cottage, or whatever. Now, why should Mr Buxton have been doing that?"

Love shook his head. Rich Dick regarded him with roguish satisfaction.

"To raise the price, sergeant. And to raise it generously. Those were his instructions. What do you think of that? I don't know what your Mr Purbright would say, but I fear conspiracy is a word that might occur to him. Conspiracy. Yes, sergeant?"

Mr Loughbury's humorous rhetoric having run its course, he waited a moment for Love to recover, then solemnly shook his head.

"No, no, no—I am having a little joke, of course. The facts are these. They are quite simple.

"The person to whom the trinkets comprising lot thirty-four belonged was an old gentleman, lately deceased, who for many years worked loyally and well for the Moldham family. It came to Mrs Moldham-Clegg's knowledge that the old servant had died and that those few rather pathetic possessions were to be sold up.

"Now, then, what did this excellent woman decide?—and remember, sergeant, that she is well in excess of three score and ten herself—what, I say, was her plan? Why, to seize the opportunity of making that proud old man's dependants a gift which neither he nor they would have dreamed of accepting in a direct form. You see what I mean, do you not?"

Love said he thought he did, but the solicitor was taking no chances. "Mrs Moldham-Clegg and Buxton were bidding against each other by arrangement," he explained. "Then, when the price reached the figure the lady had suggested, our Mr Buxton stood down."

"Neat," commented the sergeant.

Mr Loughbury looked pleased. "I venture to think," he said, "that your excellent inspector will appreciate the element of *noblesse oblige*. It is all too rarely encountered in these days of self-interest."

Love said he would mention it.

"I trust you will also convey to Mr Purbright my apologies for keeping this little matter to myself until I could take instructions from my client. We are not, alas, our own masters where confidentiality is at stake."

"The lady gave you the go-ahead, then, did she?" Love asked.

"Mrs Moldham-Clegg signified that she had no objection, provided the information goes no further," Mr Loughbury said carefully.

Love took out his notebook. “Can I have the party’s name, sir?” he inquired.

“The party?”

“The old deceased gentleman whose relatives are to get the money.”

Mr Loughbury’s lips puffed forth in a tea-cooling way. “Ooooh, I don’t know... Do you suppose it matters, sergeant?”

“Yes.”

There was nothing officious or impatient about the “yes”. Love’s expression of youthful helpfulness was undimmed. Yet Mr Loughbury could not avoid feeling a little less than easy.

“Arnold was his name, actually. Frederick Arnold.”

Love’s tongue-tip came out to supervise his committal of the name to paper.

“Address, sir?”

“Arnold’s, you mean?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He was an inmate—is that the word, inmate?—or resident, perhaps we should say—anyway, he lived in the council’s old people’s home.”

“Twilight Close,” said the sergeant. He wrote it down. “A senior citizen.” He looked blandly at the solicitor.

Mr Loughbury summoned back something of his expansive manner. “Now, here’s an interesting fact, sergeant. Did you know that old Arnold was a coachman at one time? He drove the Moldhams’ family carriage for years. Hence his nickname of ‘Whippy’. You did not know that, perhaps?”

Love said it was news to him. Could Mr Loughbury tell him the names of any of the beneficiaries from the sale of Mr Arnold’s goods.

“I’m sorry, but I really have no idea. It is scarcely my province.”

“Suppose there aren’t any,” suggested Love.

Mr Loughbury made an airy gesture of non-involvement.

The sergeant also looked unconcerned. “It’s just that I was wondering what would happen to all the money, but I suppose that that’s Mrs Moldham-Clegg’s problem.”

“Exactly,” agreed Rich Dick.

“Is there anything else you wanted the inspector to know, sir?”

“No, no. The matter probably is of no moment, but I did not wish Inspector Purbright to gain the impression that I had been less forthcoming than was reasonable.”

Love nodded amiably. However, he remained thoughtful for several moments. Just as the solicitor was about to announce his departure, Love said: “I wonder what the mincer was for.”

Mr Loughbury stared. “The what?”

"The mincer. The meat mincer. It was among his things. That and a soap dish and a couple of glass stoppers."

"Ah, sergeant, who knows what memories dwell within the seemingly commonplace trivia cherished by the elderly? Perhaps Mr Arnold preserved the mincer to remind him of domesticity in earlier days."

"Of his wife, do you mean?" Love, who was still holding a pencil, looked as if he expected an answer, and intended to record it.

Rich Dick chuckled indulgently and said that he must be getting along.

Chapter Seven

The so-called London train—it was in fact a two-coach section that had been nipped off the main body fifty miles to the west—rolled obsequiously into Flaxborough Town seven minutes late. A handful of passengers alighted and began to file across the footbridge to the ticket office and station exit. Purbright stood by the bookstall and prepared to guess which arrival was the visiting detective inspector.

His deductive powers were not needed. The third figure to appear at the turn of the steps from the bridge bore round his middle a sash-like sheet of paper bearing the word BRADLEY in big pencilled letters.

Purbright watched the man's unhurried descent. He was not much less than six feet in height, but a general broadness of construction made him look more stocky than he was: an impression strengthened by his wearing a short, dark grey overcoat, into the collar of which he seemed desirous of withdrawing as much of his neck and chin as possible. The face, though of high colour and already stubble-shadowed in the couple of hours since his morning shave, was gentle and reflective. He had a moustache, or, to be more accurate, a small area of upper lip left more or less unmown. One hand was in his overcoat pocket. The other carried a leather suitcase large enough, Purbright reflected, for a fortnight's holiday. Slung from his shoulder was a bolstered tape recorder.

As soon as Bradley reached the platform, Purbright stepped forward in greeting. Bradley carefully set down his case and shook Purbright's hand with a Stanley-Livingstone zeal that might have been considered fulsome save that the accompanying gaze of appraisal warmed quickly to friendliness. Then he took off his sash, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"It was very kind of you to come and meet me."

Bradley made the observation sound like a considered statement.

They walked out into the station square. It was flooded with hot sunshine. Three taxi drivers leaned talking to one another in the lea of their cars; with cap-shaded eyes they marked the emergence of the few passengers and followed them to reunions with waiting friends. Only one arrival appeared to want a taxi. A driver reluctantly peeled himself off the side of his cab and got in.

Purbright led Bradley to his own car. He hoisted the case into the boot; it was as heavy as it looked.

"I've brought one or two books," Bradley explained. "A couple of cassettes, as well." He declined, despite the heat, to add his overcoat to the luggage.

"We must see if we can make this a little holiday for you—at least in part," said Purbright.

"I have been much looking forward to something of the kind. The opportunity presents itself dismally seldom."

"Do you know anything of this eastern side of England?"

"I once was confined to camp at a place somewhere near Skegness."

"I was confined to one somewhere near Vienna."

"Ah, it was very important in those days to know one's place. Promiscuity in any military sense was most unwise. You did not, incidentally, get to the opera by any chance?"

"Not on that occasion, no."

"I am fond of opera, but the English in general seem to regard it as pretty offensive."

"Have you ever come across something called amateur operatics?"

"Ah, now there's an exotic aberration for you."

"It is still practised in Flaxborough."

By the time the car drew up in the yard of the Roebuck Hotel, the heady exchange of unprofessional pleasantries, verging as it did upon the fatuous, had given both men a slightly intoxicated feeling.

"We might as well book you in and then have a drink in the bar," Purbright suggested. "Your meeting my chief constable is unlikely until tomorrow or Monday."

"Good," said Bradley.

The receptionist, a tall girl with big, pink-framed spectacles and a loose-knit jumper that draped her bra like a net over whelk shells, watched very attentively the forming of Bradley's slow, small, neat signature. She turned the book round again, examined the signature right way up, and handed him his key.

Purbright noticed the number.

"Ah, you've got the room that Dr Meadows's murderer occupied."

Bradley glanced at the key, then slipped it in his pocket. He shook his head. “Spoiling me.”

1 Reported in *The Flaxborough Crab*

Mr Maddox, the manager, was in personal charge of the bar. He was not by nature a cheerful man and he somehow invested his present role with clerical dignity rather than anything in the hospitality line.

Purbright introduced his new friend. Mr Maddox’s solemnity deepened.

“Ah, inspector...” He took a good look, then turned to Purbright again. “A colleague of yours, sir?” He leaned nearer. “A pol*ice* colleague?” The voice was lowered to a quite intimidating level of what Mr Loughbury would have called confidentiality.

Purbright also leaned forward. “Food and drugs division,” he whispered.

They found seats near a window that overlooked the street. For several minutes Bradley took small, reflective sips of beer while he gazed at the conflict, perpetual in East Street between motorists and pedestrians—or, to be more accurate, between people who had managed to park their cars and those who had not.

It must have reminded him, at least, of another motorist on whose account Mr Bradley now found himself in Flaxborough.

“No sight yet, I presume, of our friend O’Dwyer,” he said.

Purbright shook his head. “He certainly hasn’t been to ask for his car back.”

Bradley pondered a little longer before saying: “You know, that is distinctly out of character.”

“In the circumstances, I’d have thought it very sensible.”

“Ah, but Frankie is not sensible. He is a woefully inept criminal. Would there were more like him.”

“On his record, he should be fairly easily catchable,” said Purbright.

Bradley said, “Hm,” and looked at his beer. “In London,” he said, “the most heinous malefactors are the brewers.” He shrugged back to the subject in hand. “No, we really are worried about Frankie. Domestically, he is very much a creature of habit. He always rings home after a job to put Edna’s mind at rest. I find that quite touching.”

“Edna being...?”

“His common-law wife. A large, industrious woman with yellow ringlets. I went to see her last night. She was very upset. She feels strongly that Frankie is dead.”

“Is that *your* opinion, too?” Purbright was frowning.

“Not opinion, exactly. Shall we say that I shouldn’t be surprised?”

"What I find especially perplexing at the moment," said Purbright, "is the man's presence so far from his own territory. Why should a London burglar—that is his main vocation, I understand?—yes, well, why should he take it into his head to cross half England and turn up at a small town auction sale?"

Bradley smiled slowly. "Yes, it is rather bizarre. But I think I have part of an answer." He brought out a handful of folded pieces of paper and envelopes from an inner pocket and began to sort through them. "Have you," he asked "heard of a Mr Anderson?"

"Any particular Anderson? It is not a very uncommon name."

Bradley selected one of his pieces of paper, unfolded it and placed it carefully on the table beside his beer. "This one signs himself simply 'Mr Anderson'. There is a certain regality in that, I think; a presumption of universal recognition. Particularly as he sees no necessity to give an address."

Purbright picked up the paper. It was dark blue, lined, and the writing had been done with a leaky ball-point.

Dear Chas, it began. Purbright looked up. "Chas?"

"One of our man's spare names," Bradley explained. "Chas—Charlie—Charles Chubb. The envelope was correctly addressed to his place in Goldhawk Road, anyway."

Purbright grinned. "You realize, of course, that my chief constable..."

"Heavens, yes. What a felicitous coincidence for him."

Purbright resumed his reading.

> Dear Chas, I have to tell you that my old friend and yours of course Mr Arnold passed on a couple of weeks back it was very peaceful they tell me although I was not with him at the end worse luck. That is not the only thing I had got to tell you though because there is this promise I made to Mr Arnold when I first come aboard here. It is about his gear. He said you know about it and of course I never asked him what was not my business but he said if anything was to happen to him sudden I was to see you got it. Well I have kept an eye on what they were doing to poor Mr Arnolds gear and everything is going to be sold that I do know. So you want to be at the auction room at what they call the Volunteers Hall here in Flax on Thursday July 21th before half past ten am. I have not said anything to them here as they dont take notice of anybody least of all the poor residents thats a good one residents we are just prisoners in irons. Yours very faithfully —Mr Anderson.

Bradley rose and took their glasses to the bar, where the manager had been furtively examining his spirit measures. Mr Maddox

smiled winningly at his guest and asked what was his pleasure—two similar, would it be?

"I shouldn't have been offended, you know," Bradley told him, "had you used the phrase 'same again'. It has been legitimized by custom."

Mr Maddox threw back his head and dosed his eyes as if in the throes of huge amusement. "Oh, very good, sir!" He selected two fresh glasses, held them to the light and filled them meticulously to the brim. "There we are, sir. Two similar."

When Bradley returned, Purbright had read the letter through again.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"From Edna. With his usual carelessness, Frankie had left it behind. Not that it would appear incriminating in any other context, although I suppose it could be construed an enticement to steal. Anyway, Edna was too worried to withhold what she regards as a species of death warrant."

"From another world?"

Bradley gave a little shrug. "You must not underestimate," he said, "the Londoner's native simplicity. The commercial traveller who returns from Luton is treated like Marco Polo."

"I'm pretty sure I know the source of the letter—the place, if not the writer, and he should be fairly easily identifiable."

"Some kind of an institution, I should have thought," said Bradley. "One notices the jaundiced tone. A hospital, perhaps?"

Purbright shook his head. "Twilight Close."

"Good heavens," said Bradley, very quietly. He drank some beer.

Purbright looked pensive. "Anderson...I'm wondering if it could be the same Anderson we were always trying to knock off in the old days for taking bets. [2] It would be helpful if it were; he was an observant old villain."

2 Reported in *Hopjoy Was Here*

"Had your friend been to sea, by any chance?"

"Ah, of course..." Purbright skimmed quickly back through the letter. "Yes—'when I first come aboard'—that certainly sounds like old Crutchy. The age would be about right, too. Late seventies by now."

"This is quite a district for soubriquets, I notice. Would it be too much to hope that Mr Anderson is a one-legged sailorman?"

"By no means. That is exactly what he is. Or was. Welfare authorities consider wooden legs antipathetic to a well-run establishment. They have probably fitted Crutchy with a plastic imitation one."

"In simulated flesh tones," Bradley added, grimly.

The bar was beginning to be crowded: not with farmers, corn

chandlers and auctioneers who in former years would have shoved and bellowed in contentious good humour about the fireplace, serious only when they counted change, their faces like red lanterns swinging in the smoke cloud; but with younger men very conscious of new moustaches but never looking at the paper money they pulled from tight hip pockets to buy lager and lime which they bore to wives left perched on guard over plastic carriers containing three-minute-meals for a week.

"I hope you will take lunch as my guest," Bradley said. "Then we can give thought to the possible whereabouts of O'Dwyer's body."

"You must not be pessimistic."

"About lunch?"

"No, that would be understandable. About O'Dwyer, I mean."

Rather to their surprise, the two inspectors found in the dining-room that they were to be waited upon by the manager himself, who somehow had arrived before them.

"Not on duty, I trust, gentlemen?" whispered the ubiquitous Mr Maddox in a rasp that could have been heard in the street.

Bradley placed one finger against the side of his nose and swivelled his eyes. "Does that door lock?" he asked, softly. Mr Maddox regarded the sole means of communication with the kitchen. He looked very alarmed and said nothing else.

They ordered something called Beef Wellington, on the strength of Purbright's attractive theory that it was cooked in a boot. A bottle of Burgundy was also called for.

"Do you mind if I telephone my wife?" Purbright asked. "She is not expecting me to lunch, but I do not like to indulge in these sybaritic interludes without letting her know. I expect she would also appreciate notice before the shops shut that you are joining us for a meal tomorrow."

When he returned, he described to Bradley in some detail the sequence of events since Love's encounter with their present quarry.

Bradley listened attentively, chin on chest, while he gazed at the patterns in the linen tablecloth between them, as if they represented for him an impromptu map of Flaxborough.

"Cherrytree Avenue—do you attach any significance to it in relation to whatever O'Dwyer came here to do, or to find?" he asked when Purbright had told his story.

"I know of no one living there who would qualify as a burglar's confederate. They mostly are people who either were born here or have lived in the town for a good many years. It is the kind of neighbourhood that used to be called respectable."

"Nothing suggestive at all?" Bradley asked. He had moved a pepper pot to the side of the table and looked anxious to participate in

something tactically demonstrative.

"Only," said Purbright, picking up the salt, "that Cherrytree Avenue is very near the old people's home in which Mr Anderson considers himself to be incarcerated." He set the salt next to the pepper.

"And where, in relation to that area, is the stately home you suspect O'Dwyer of breaking into?" Bradley had the mustard pot in his hand.

"This"—Purbright traced the perimeter of their table—"being Flaxborough?"

"Yes."

"In that case, it would be somewhere near the next table but one, I'm afraid. Moldham lies a few miles along the main road that goes more or less north east to the coast."

"That would be in the opposite direction to the London road?"

"It would."

Bradley nodded and replaced the mustard. "So when Frankie had finished breaking into Moldham Hall, he might have considered it convenient to take Twilight Close into his homeward itinerary."

"At two-ish in the morning?"

"He was not a man to stand on ceremony."

"No," said Purbright, "it seems not."

Mr Maddox, looking stern and steamy, arrived at their table. He frowned at Cherrytree Avenue and Twilight Close and tweaked them back instantly to their proper positions. Then he stood aside in awful supervision of the seventeen-year-old youth, his face scarlet beneath a chef's hat, who served Purbright with Bradley's order of egg mayonnaise and Bradley with his guest's smoked eel.

"All right, sir?" inquired Mr Maddox of each in turn while he side-eyed the youth with a wolfish smile. They said yes, fine, and began to eat what they had been given.

When they were alone again, Bradley said: "Do you think I should remonstrate with that man on the subject of the boy's hat? The poor lad is painfully embarrassed, as well as he might be."

Purbright counselled him to temper compassion with tact. "Maddox will undoubtedly suppose the boy to have slipped you a note of complaint if you say anything."

Until the next appearance of the manager and his hostage, bearing the main course on a trolley, they talked about the late Mr Arnold.

"It looks," said Purbright, "as though Arnold was O'Dwyer's confederate, if he had one."

"Confederate in what, though?"

"Theft of some kind, on the face of it. We may know more about

that when the forensic people have finished with the picture from the auction sale."

"What do you know of Arnold?" asked Bradley.

"Not a great deal. I hadn't even heard his name until yesterday, when my coroner's officer mentioned it. He died about a fortnight ago."

"In that old people's home?"

"So it seems." Purbright was silent a moment, then added: "If you are going to ask if Arnold ever had anything to do with the Moldhams, the answer is that he was employed there at one time."

"It would be tempting to postulate the man's having purloined the family jewels and lain low until it was safe to turn them to account," said Bradley.

Purbright smiled. "Tempting, indeed. It would be too much in the tradition of the thirties' detective story, though."

Bradley spread his hands. His normally sleepy eyes suddenly brightened. "My dear friend, what is this *but* a thirties' detective story? Why else do you think I came here?"

Chapter Eight

The superintendent registrar of Twilight Close was called Vernon Wellbeloved, and Inspector Bradley had received from the name expectation of a large, pastoral person, very beneficient in manner, a sort of municipal Saint Peter. He was introduced instead to a sinewy little man with a head shaped like a mason's mall and nearly as bald. It was a hard-looking head, with two holes left in it for even harder-looking eyes, one of which Mr Wellbeloved kept permanently half-closed as if in surreptitious scrutiny. Bradley was convinced that at night the other eye would be kept permanently half-open.

Purbright apologized for their having called on a Saturday afternoon. Mr Wellbeloved gave no sign of his finding the apology other than appropriate.

Purbright said that he and his colleague were wishful of talking to Mr Wellbeloved about the late Mr Frederick, otherwise known as Whippy, Arnold; and would appreciate in addition an opportunity of putting some questions to Mr Anderson, one of the residents.

The superintendent registrar considered these requests in hunched silence, far back in his chair, while he turned between the fingers of both hands a long, green pencil with a very sharp point.

When he spoke it was quietly but with a suddenness that had just as alarming an effect as a shout.

"Excitable, these old people. Very. You do realize." A trace of Welsh accent.

"Mr Anderson will naturally be approached with consideration for his age," said Purbright.

Mr Wellbeloved stared as if to challenge a blatant lie. Then he rocked himself forward and took a folder from the desk drawer.

Holding the pencil at its end, like a wand, he used it to trace an entry on one of the sheets the folder contained.

"He is not well."

Bradley blinked. "Incapacitated not well? Or just fed up not well?"

The inquiry attracted the full one-and-a-half eye power of Mr Wellbeloved's displeasure. "I have here"—he poised the pencil delicately above the folder—"the daily medical report sheets. The doctor has categorized Anderson as RC. Nothing to do with religion. Restricted communication is what that means. The old chap is not quite himself. Understand me?"

"Perhaps for the moment," said Purbright, stiffly, "we should address ourselves to the other matter. Mr Arnold's death. There are several rather..."

"May I ask," Mr Wellbeloved interrupted, "why these inquiries of yours are being made? Has there been a complaint of some sort? Eh?" He turned sharply to scowl at Bradley. "An allegation by somebody? Eh?"

"No, sir," said Purbright. "But we are interested in certain property that was sold on behalf of Mr Arnold's estate, as I suppose the lawyers would describe it."

"Estate?" repeated Mr Wellbeloved. "Property? What property? I recall being shown two or three rubbishy bits and pieces when his room was being cleared. Are those what you call his estate?"

Bradley spoke. "Inasmuch as they seem to have been his sole possessions, may we not now be considerate enough to avoid words like rubbish? Estate may be a conceit, but I see nothing wrong in that."

Again Mr Wellbeloved subjected him to a baleful stare. "Did you say you were from London?"

"I did not say so, but London is where I usually work."

"I see. Well, in Flaxborough, Mr..."

"Bradley. Detective Inspector. No MBE."

"...Inspector Bradley—in Flaxborough, I say, we do not indulge in conceits. Some of my old charges are fanciful enough already. It would be mistaken kindness to encourage in them delusions of grandeur."

Purbright intervened. "Mr Wellbeloved, our aim is simply to establish one or two facts concerning the late Mr Arnold. Matters of record. Firstly, how long had he been a resident of Twilight Close?"

"Four years." The answer came without hesitation.

"Thank you, sir. Secondly, how old was he?"

Another folder was disinterred, without enthusiasm but not noticeably grudgingly. The long, sharp pencil went seeking.

"Born 1898, or so he said."

"A local man?"

"We think not, though he had worked in the locality for many, many years. He claimed to be an Australian."

"Was he married?"

"No."

"Children?" asked Bradley.

The little man in the chair made no reply. He was now looking exclusively at Purbright.

"I take it," said Purbright, "that he had no close relatives, so far as the welfare authority is aware."

"Correct."

"Did he leave a will, sir?"

"If he did, it was not lodged in the custody of the Department."

“Does that explain why his property—such as it was—came to be sold by auction after Mr Arnold’s death?” This question was slipped in by Bradley and Purbright much feared that it would be forfeit as coming from a *persona non grata*. After consideration, however, Mr Wellbeloved issued a reply.

“The Department serves these old souls in many capacities, you must understand. Lawyer—trustee—undertaker. In most cases, it is a tidying-up operation that is called for. Tiresome, but necessary.”

“The funeral, do you mean?” The mild tones of Bradley again.

“No, I do not mean the funeral, inspector. I mean the considerable trouble taken by myself and my staff to recoup a few coppers of public funds through the sale at public auction—and under public supervision if you like—of the worthless bits and pieces that we are happy to allow our sentimental old magpies to collect about them, bless their hearts.”

“Provided,” said Bradley, “that they are intestate magpies, I presume?”

“Of course,” snapped Mr Wellbeloved.

Purbright took over. “You will have heard, I expect, sir, that the sale of Mr Arnold’s possessions realized nearly four hundred pounds. Can you imagine what prompted someone to pay such a high price for what you term worthless bits and pieces?”

“Not for a moment. A preposterous sum.”

“Which will go into public funds,” softly added Bradley before Purbright could head him off.

Wellbeloved, though, was not to be drawn again. Ignoring the provocative interloper from London, he favoured the native policeman with the nearest thing to a friendly smile that the Department strictures upon subjective attitudes permitted, and said: “Inspector Purbright—you, I know, will appreciate the funny...no, not funny—droll, rather—the droll side of what we have been discussing. That picture, you see—the thing that people must have been bidding for—didn’t belong to old Arnold at all, bless his heart. It was council property. He made it in our little workshop here in the Close. Occupational therapy. Thanks to public funding, gentlemen. Public funding.”

“Ashes to ashes,” murmured Inspector Bradley.

“Did Mr Arnold ever have any visitors?” asked Purbright.

“If he did, it was very rarely. Very rarely indeed. Of course, that is not to say that he had no communication with the outside world. He was free to go out, you understand. In the PPs.”

“The PPs, sir?”

“Perambulation periods,” explained Mr Wellbeloved.

Before Bradley could deliver the question that he was giving signs

of gestating, Purbright asked: “Was Mr Anderson a friend of Mr Arnold’s?”

“I think,” said Mr Wellbeloved, in whom an antipathy towards Inspector Bradley seemed to be inducing a corresponding affectation of helpfulness for Purbright, “that I may safely claim that all our residents are friends, one to another, bless them.”

“Yes, sir, but I mean those two special friends—in the sense of confiding in each other?”

“Were they buddies?” amplified Bradley.

“Buddies,” murmured Mr Wellbeloved to himself, with infinite distaste. He told Purbright no, he was not aware of any particular liaison between Arnold and Anderson.

“Never mind, sir. Mr Anderson will doubtless be able to deal with that point when we talk to him.”

Mr Wellbeloved said nothing.

“Which will be?” Purbright pressed.

The superintendent looked gravely regretful. “That is not in my hands, Mr Purbright. You will have to take the matter up with Dr Gule.”

“Gule?”

“Dr D. Gule—D. for Damion, I believe.”

“He is your resident doctor?”

Wellbeloved smiled thinly. “Dr Gule is a consultant physician with specialized application to geriatric psychiatry. He is not a resident, but we are fortunate in having the benefit of his retained attendance.”

“He is not upon the premises now, I take it,” said Purbright.

“Oh, no.”

“Can you tell me when he is likely to be available?”

“Monday possibly. If not, it will almost certainly be Tuesday afternoon.”

“The prognosis is very vague.” The observation was Bradley’s, but he was addressing his colleague, who nodded and turned back to Wellbeloved.

“I’m afraid that inquiries cannot be delayed that long, sir. Perhaps it would be better if I were to approach the doctor directly. May I have his address?”

Wellbeloved scowled at Bradley, who was not looking, then quickly donned a more conciliatory expression for Purbright’s benefit. “It’s possible that I could get you an appointment for Monday,” he offered.

“I prefer not to put you to that much trouble, sir. His address will be sufficient. Or his telephone number, perhaps.”

The superintendent reluctantly consulted the back pages of a

pocket diary. He read out a Chalmsbury number.

After making a note of it, Purbright conferred quietly with his proscribed companion. Again he faced Wellbeloved.

"Would it not be possible," he asked, "for you to ring Dr Gule now and ask if he would agree to our having a very short interview with Anderson before we leave? It would save time and trouble for everybody."

The superintendent shook his head emphatically and began to tidy his folders.

"The doctor may be telephoned from this office only in case of emergency. I cannot make an exception to that rule. In any event, I know exactly what his reply would be."

"Oh? What would it be, Mr Wellbeloved?"

"He would refuse. No question about it." Back into the drawer went the folders.

"And why are you so sure, sir?" Purbright persisted.

Again the narrow, unamused, secretive smile, but no reply. They waited. Somewhere outside, heavy, quick footsteps pounded on one of the asphalt walks; a woman's voice, loud but cut into portions by breathlessness: "Not that...way, Mr Pawley...now you know...that very well..." Three or four quavering catcalls answered in the distance.

"If there is anything further I can do for you, inspector..." Mr Wellbeloved had quite suddenly left his chair and was stepping past Purbright to reach the door.

Without haste, Inspector Bradley moved in the same direction until he was inescapably in the forefront of the superintendent's field of vision.

"Is Anderson dead?" he asked.

There was a short silence, then the prim voice of Mr Wellbeloved. "Certainly not. Why should you think that?"

"His having been forbidden visitors does seem rather drastic," Purbright suggested.

"Not at all. These old souls are easily excited. When one has suffered a shock, perhaps a violent encounter, something of that sort, he needs to be kept quiet for a bit."

"What was the nature," persisted Bradley, "of the violent encounter that Anderson suffered?"

"I said nothing about..." Wellbeloved's mouth clamped shut. He was looking flustered. He appealed to Purbright: "If you have more questions, I should much prefer that you put them to Dr Gule. I really cannot discuss medical cases with outsiders, even if they have some claim to authority."

The door stood open. Bradley stepped into the hallway and waited. Following him, Purbright paused and turned. "There is just

one point I think you might be able to clear up, sir, without involving the patients."

"Residents," murmured the superintendent, automatically.

"Of course. I'm sorry. No, I wanted to ask you simply if there had been a visit here recently by a man calling himself O'Dwyer. A Londoner. He might have used another name. Chubb, possibly; even Scoggins." Seeing Wellbeloved shake his head dubiously, Purbright added: "All perfectly memorable, you will notice, sir."

"We have many visitors, inspector. This place is virtually home from home. Isn't that right, Reuben?" This last question was directed in a raised voice to an old man in a cap who was crossing the hall. The old man looked immediately in their direction and smiled in greeting.

"Home from home. I was telling the gentlemen this is home from home." The words boomed out like a missionary's message to a deaf aboriginal.

The old man's smile broadened. He winked at the two policemen, as if in acknowledgement of a joke, and went his way.

When he was alone once more in his office, Mr Wellbeloved sat far back in his too-big chair and stared at the point of the long pencil that he held still. He brought it closer and closer to the centre of his forehead, altering the angle of the pencil until it lay along the plane of his nose, like a crusader's sword. Then, suddenly, he flung it to the far side of the room and reached for the telephone.

The two inspectors made their way across the hall towards the main doors that led from this, the administrative block, to the grounds in which lay the residential buildings, a small infirmary, and workshops.

Bradley walked gingerly; the floor of the now deserted hall had been polished to the semblance of a sheet of water. There was a faint smell of disinfectant in the air. The only sound was that of their own footsteps. They passed the half-open doors of empty rooms and saw shrouded typewriters and duplicating machines.

"Growing old seems to require a huge servicing organization," Bradley remarked.

They emerged into hot, white sunshine. The lawn encompassed by the driveway before the main entrance was partly shaded by a big copper beech. Beneath it, three or four residents had, in defiance of prohibitory notices, set their chairs. One of them, Purbright recognized. He waved and was acknowledged.

He and Bradley walked over.

The man in the chair was big and bowed and dark-eyed and had three protruding front teeth the size and colour of old pub piano keys. He was wearing four woollen waistcoats, two in shades of grey, one

blue, one puce. His head, surmounted by short and scrubby hair, still nearly black, jutted forth from his knitted carapace like a turtle's.

Purbright introduced him to Bradley as Walt Latter, far famed in the best days of Flaxborough's shrimping fleet. He saw no reason to add that he had last seen Walt in the dock at Lincoln Assizes twelve years ago patiently explaining the circumstances of a recent bereavement.

"I was just wondering," said Purbright after exchange of greetings, "if you'd seen anything of old Crutchy lately. They tell me he's been poorly."

"Ah, they say so," confirmed Mr Latter, warily, and with a hint of inquiry as to what his fellow mariner was wanted for.

"He's in the infirmary, is he, Walt?"

"So they reckon." At the end of each reply the old man carefully drew down his long upper lip over the piano-key teeth. This had the curious effect of making him look secretly amused.

Several of the other trespassers showed signs of wishing to join the conversation.

"Not like old Crutchy to be ill," Purbright said. "I remember him being out in all weathers."

An old lady with thick, custard-coloured hair giggled into her knitting and said aye, taking betting slips. The others smiled but watched the two policemen. Purbright and Bradley laughed with the old lady. Everyone looked pleased.

"Mr Anderson had a bit of a set-to. That's the top and bottom of it. He's not ill. Not sick ill. They're just keeping him quiet."

The author of this contribution was a small, red-complexioned man. He rearranged his chair to face the new arrivals and sat forward in a businesslike way.

"A set-to?" Bradley sounded intrigued yet at the same time deferential. The red-complexioned man hitched his chair a fraction nearer and opened his mouth to say more.

"That he never!"

The interruption came from a fourth member of the group, a very fat old lady who appeared to be worked by steam, of which a considerable excess was discharged with speech.

"Harold never had no set-to," she insisted. (Purbright blinked; he had never heard the villainous old mariner called Harold before.) "He had a visitor and it was too much for him. I told you that yesterday, Arthur."

"Visitor?" challenged the small man, scornfully. "What, at supper time?"

Walt Latter unsheathed his piano-key teeth. "Ah, a woman, most like!" His earlier caution had given way to heavy-jowled roguishness.

The two ladies signified, one by a dive into her knitting, the other by a steamy shriek, that the idea appealed vastly. Arthur, though, was unamused.

"He was knocked about, was poor old Crutchy. One of the ladies on 'B' was going past when somebody opened the door and she saw him. He'd had a bash on the face, she said."

"She'd say anything, that one," said the fat lady.

"You don't know who it was. I never said."

"You didn't have to. It was that Lily Harrison, out of George Street."

The old lady with the knitting spoke. "The doctor was with him yesterday morning, I know that. He came special."

"Who was this visitor he was supposed to have had, then?" inquired Arthur, not quite so contemptuously, of the fat lady.

She gave a shake of the head, steamed a little, then turned to Walt. "Somebody said he looked like a clergyman—who was that?" (Walt did not know.) "Aye, well, he did."

"Fine sort of clergyman he turned out to be," said the knitting lady.

By now the two inspectors were being either ignored altogether by those taking part in the conversation or treated as friendly neutrals to be smiled at and invited to bear witness to the things said.

After ten minutes or so, they wandered off and compared gleanings as they strolled along one of the paths that promised to lead eventually to where they had left their car.

"It would appear," said Bradley, "that my Mr O'Dwyer paid a personal call on his correspondent on Thursday night. At supper time—that does sound characteristic."

"But it hardly squares with what we thought at first," said Purbright. "His car having been left nearby, we supposed he had paid his visit here *after* the Moldham break-in—about two in the morning."

"He could have come twice."

Purbright looked doubtful. "Too risky, surely. That 'set-to' we heard about must have put the night staff on their guard. O'Dwyer would realize that."

Bradley was silent for a moment. Then he asked: "Why, do you suppose, was Mr Wellbeloved so much worse informed of attacks on residents than Lily Harrison of George Street?"

They were walking past a long brick outbuilding. Purbright glanced into one of its windows. He pulled at Bradley's sleeve and pointed to a bench inside the hut.

Laid on the bench were three rectangular plaster casts, at various stages of painting. One picture, though incomplete, Purbright recognized as a fellow of lot thirty-four. Some empty frames also were

on the bench. Hanging on the wall nearby were several moulds.

"The source," remarked Purbright, "of Mrs Moldham-Clegg's work of art."

They walked on.

"We were talking of Mr Wellbeloved," said Inspector Bradley, "and his failure to know about a visitor who beat up one of his dear old souls."

Purbright was looking with some concentration at the next outbuilding on their route. "If I am not mistaken, that is where the dear old soul in question will have been put."

"The infirmary?"

"I believe so."

A concrete ramp led from the path to white double doors in the building's gable end. When they drew level with it, they stopped and glanced at each other.

"I wonder," said Purbright softly, as they pushed and found yielding one of the doors, "if he still takes bets?"

Chapter Nine

Beyond the double doors was a small lobby and a further door. Purbright knocked gently. There was no response. He pushed it open.

Bradley followed him into a white-tiled room with a sink, cupboards and a desk. It looked likely to be a combination of dispensary and office. A door in the opposite wall was ajar. They heard the sounds of light footsteps and of glassware being set down. Purbright opened wide the door and beckoned Bradley to stand beside him.

"Good afternoon," he called.

There were four very white-looking beds in the big, peach-glossed room. Three were empty, their covers folded and set in a neat pile on each. The second bed on the left was bulged by an occupant. A young girl in nurse's uniform with a round, button-nosed face and a fringe of pale blonde hair was standing by the bed, half turned, looking surprised. She held a small conical glass.

"We are looking," said Purbright, in a stage whisper, "for Mr Anderson—Mr Harold Anderson."

The girl raised her nearly colourless eyebrows and pointed at the bed. She appeared to be somewhat at a loss.

The policemen moved nearer. Bradley gave the girl an avuncular grin but desisted when she looked startled.

"I don't think he's supposed to see anybody," she said. "Are you

family?"

Purbright said no, they were, regrettably, policemen, but they would not trouble the old gentleman for long; they only wished to ask him a couple of questions.

"It's a pity you weren't here five minutes ago," the nurse said. "Doctor's only just gone. You could have asked him if it was all right."

"Doctor Gule, do you mean?" Purbright asked, quickly.

"That's right."

"He was here this afternoon?"

"Yes. You must have passed him at the gate if you've only just arrived."

There came a weak but cheerful croak from the bed.

" 'Ullo, skipper."

"Hello, Crutchy," responded Purbright.

The bony old head on the pillow looked as if it had been knocked about on jetties, hatch covers and pub doorways all its life. It was pitted and creased with black, like long-weathered wood. On jaw, cheek and brow were small strips of sticking plaster, startlingly bright pink.

"What have they been doing to you, then?"

The head gave a little jerk of disgust and one of the cavernous eye sockets creased into a dreadful wink. "Whurrh," growled Crutchy.

The nurse looked at patient and policeman in turn. "Doctor said nobody, actually, but I suppose he meant ordinary people. Don't be long, though, will you? Mr Anderson's just had a sedative and he'll want to go to sleep again."

She gave the bed-covers a tweak and left.

Purbright recognized in Anderson the drowsy amiability of the slightly drunk or doped; this was going to be like playing twenty questions.

"It was this fellow Charlie Chubb, was it, who duffed you up on Thursday night, Crutchy?"

The old man hesitated, then shrugged one shoulder. "Aye, I suppose so."

"Who is he?"

"I dunno. Fellow from London."

"Yes, but not just *any* fellow. You wrote to him and told him about a picture and things that Whippy Arnold wanted him to have."

Craftiness surfaced through Anderson's dose of sedative. "I never 'ad no picture, skipper. Dunno about it."

Bradley took a turn. 'Why was Chubb so mad at you, Mr Anderson? Did he blame you for not having got hold of the picture—as we know you didn't—and keeping it for him?"

"Ah, that's about it, matey. I reckon you're right."

"Have you no idea," Purbright resumed, "what Chubb was to your friend Arnold? Was he a relative? Had Arnold ever talked about him?"

One of Cratchy's eyes had begun to close. Bradley took a pound note from his trouser pocket and examined it. The eye snapped wide open again.

"Talked about him...ah, well, no, not to say talk. But Whippy sometimes sent letters to him. I thought perhaps he was his nevvy. He didn't have no fambly, did Whippy."

"Did no one ever come to see him?" Purbright asked.

Crutchy shook his head, feebly. "Can't say as they did. Not while I've been here."

"This man Arnold..." Bradley was reflectively rubbing his lower lip with the pound note. "What did you know about him, Mr Anderson? He seems to have been something of an enigmatic character, doesn't he?"

"You wot?"

"Bit of a dark horse, wasn't he, your friend Whippy?" Purbright translated.

Crutchy gave the question thought for so long that Bradley feared the sedative had triumphed over hopes of reward. But then the old man gave a sniff followed by the opinion that Arnold had been for some time before his death "a point or two off his bearings".

"Why do you think that, Mr Anderson?"

"Well, for one thing, Gilly Gully was always in and out, wasn't he? And you've got to be pretty low in the water before *he* bothers to come aboard."

Again Purbright played interpreter. "He says that Arnold was often attended by Dr Gule, who does not normally visit a patient unless he is very ill." He turned again to Anderson. "Perhaps you can tell Mr Bradley and me a little bit more about what happened here on Thursday night."

"Not *here*, skipper. I was in my cabin. They'd just brought supper round, and I hear this knock at the door and I think, funny, they're smart off the mark with seconds, but it's not seconds, it's a pussy-footed cove with a grin and sticky-out teeth, and he pushes in and shuts the door behind him and says, You Anderson? he says, and I says, *Mister* Anderson to you or you'll be over the side, matey, and then he takes his hand out of his overcoat pocket and he doesn't stop smiling but just leans over and touches the side of my face with his hand and it's like walking into the boom on a dark night, not a word of a lie, and he says very smarmy but very nasty as well, 'Ow'd you like your hartificial limb up your arse, Mister Anderson? and I know as this isn't a cove I can monkey with, for all his soppy looks.

"So anyway, he says, Wot you got for me from Mister Arnold, and I says, Nothing can't you read a letter? and he leans over and I walk into the boom but with the other side of my face this time. And then he asks who's this old pussy with a double-barrelled name who goes round—and this is what *he* says, not me, skip—who goes round buying what belongs to somebody else, and I says, how the hell and high water do I know? but he starts leaning over again and I remember something Whippy said once about working for these harris..."

The old sailorman's eyes had been slowly dosing for some time, but without diminution of speech. Now, though, the words began to present difficulties.

"...these harristocro..." He smiled as if in sleep. "...tocrofats...remembered what he said..."

"You told the man who was threatening you that Arnold used to work out at Moldham Hall, did you, Crutchy?" Purbright prompted.

Anderson half opened his eyes. Some of the old craftiness was in them as he tried to shake his head with some show of indignation. They closed completely. "Arrh," he said, and slid into peaceful sleep.

The two policemen sought out the young nurse. She was seated drinking a cup of coffee in the dispensary-cum-office and staring out of the window. As they came through the door from the ward, she turned and rose.

"He's asleep," Purbright said, softly.

She looked relieved. "I wasn't sure that you ought, really...I suppose it's all right, though."

"Is he very ill, then?" asked Bradley.

"Oh, no, not ill," she said at once. Then, "Of course, he did get a bit of a fright, but you'll know all about that."

Purbright smiled at her. "Your knock-out drops certainly seem effective, nurse."

She smiled back, but not with ease. "Dr Gule had a little trouble with him at first. He's a very wilful old gentleman. They don't realize how important rest can be in getting better."

Purbright said, "How true," and they took their leave pleasantly enough.

Outside, he frowned at his companion and said: "How can he be getting better when he hasn't been ill? I know Crutchy of old. It would take more than Mr O'Dwyer to put him out for long."

"The people who run this place—the local authority, presumably—must be feeling nervous. Authorities always do when something happens that they haven't bargained for." Bradley smiled at a recollection. "I received the impression from Mr Wellbeloved that *we* should have qualified for sedatives if it had been up to him."

Purbright glanced back at the infirmary building. “The girl wasn’t altogether happy about doping old Anderson. She must know it was a pretty stiff dose.”

They walked on in silence for a while. “I wonder,” Bradley said at last, “if it is simply a question of an institution’s good name—of its administrators wishing to avoid unwelcome publicity concerning what I suppose would be called today a ‘security issue’. One could sympathize with their trying to bamboozle the Press. Bamboozling the police, though—that is not a sensible course.”

“Wellbeloved is not a stupid man,” Purbright said.

“No, I did not think so.”

“Of Gule, I know very little. He has a reputation for imposing upon susceptible young women and also for owing a lot of money to tradesmen, but in Flaxborough these are not accounted disqualifications from high office.”

“Nor in London,” Bradley assured him.

They reached the car. Purbright opened the door on the passenger’s side, then, got in himself. There had been no unlocking. Bradley remarked upon his faith in the honesty of Flaxborough folk.

Purbright shook his head. “Not honesty. Discrimination.”

He hesitated. “I was wondering if we ought to use what is left of the afternoon to introduce you to the harristocrofats. On second thoughts, though“—he pressed the starter—“we’d better leave them until we know more about the picture they are so eager to acquire.”

By the time they reached Fen Street, the town had a dusty, slightly somnolent air, enriched in the area of the market by the scent of warm fruit. The police headquarters, built by late Victorians out of authoritative red brick and ornamental tile, looked over-baked.

Inside it was pleasantly cool. Bradley peered through the relative darkness to where the thick spectacles of PC Braine gleamed inquisitively. Braine was in shirt sleeves. He gave a jerk to his globular, slightly flattened head and emitted a sound. The sound, though not recognizably verbal, conveyed with quite extraordinary economy not only challenge and inquiry but contempt, indifference and pride in having been born in Yorkshire.

“How like a frog he is,” remarked Bradley after Purbright, ignoring the monosyllabic custodian of the front office, had led him into the corridor beyond.

They found Sergeant Love in the billiards room. He was losing a game of snooker fairly rapidly to Patrolman Brevitt. Only five colours remained. Purbright waved the pair to finish. Love nodded cheerfully: it was his turn and the green ball was hanging at the very edge of a pocket. He aimed with great nonchalance and mis-cued. Brevitt sank the lot. His “Bad luck, Sidney” sounded like the condolence offered by

a public executioner on piecework.

In Purbright's office, Love gave an account of Loughbury's visit. He held his notebook low down so that Bradley could see that it contained shorthand.

When he had finished, he looked at each inspector in turn with bright and innocent so-now-you-know satisfaction.

Purbright asked Bradley what he thought of the solicitor's explanation of the high price reached by lot thirty-four.

"A singularly tortuous form of philanthropy, surely," said Bradley.

"It is also rather odd," Purbright said, "that they went to all that trouble—Mrs Moldham-Clegg and her legal advisers, that is—without making sure that old Arnold *had* any dependants."

Bradley glanced at Love's still open notebook, to the sergeant's immediate and obvious gratification, and said: "Judging from the very full report we have been given of what Loughbury had to say, he did not simply assume the man had a family; he specifically mentioned dependents who 'would not have dreamed' of accepting a direct gift." He looked at Love. "That is so, is it not, sergeant?"

Blushing happily, Love sent a finger wiggling amongst his Pitman's. After a few moments, he nodded and stood very erect. "Yes, sir, that's right...*would...not...have...dreamed...of...*" He frowned. "*Of gasping...*?"

"Accepting," Bradley corrected gently. "Very similar outline." He turned to Purbright. "I suppose we must not rule out the possibility that O'Dwyer really was a relative of the old man? In a perfectly genuine sense?"

Purbright shrugged. "And that Mrs Moldham-Clegg and Loughbury knew of his existence, you mean?"

"Yes."

"They would have needed to be especially broad-minded to accept a burglar as a beneficiary."

"He wasn't a very successful burglar," Bradley observed. "Anyway, they were not to know his profession; he always comes up in court described as an unemployed watchmaker."

"I still find Loughbury's tale unconvincing," Purbright said. "What about O'Dwyer's appearance at that auction sale? A needy relation doesn't come all those miles from home and bid into the hundreds for a memento of his old uncle."

"True," Bradley conceded. "But why should Mrs Moldham-Clegg have suspected anything? I don't suppose for a moment that she would remember any of her ex-coachman's family, even if she had ever seen them. O'Dwyer was just another bidder as far as she was concerned. She may even have supposed that he had been planted by

Loughbury in addition to his clerk, Buxton. As for Buxton, he was there simply to carry out instructions. Or so I understand matters."

Love took the opportunity of assuring Bradley (whom he already considered a crime-buster in the suavest Yard tradition) that he had read the situation absolutely correctly.

"We'd love some tea, Sid," Purbright informed him, by way of reward. Love paused at the door and looked back indecisively. He caught Purbright's eye and mimed "Cups?" with his mouth. Purbright nodded. Bradley thoughtfully looked for several moments at the door through which the alacritous sergeant had departed.

"You know," he said, "our Frankie must have had a depth of viciousness which even I had not suspected if he could slug a lad as young as that."

"Sergeant Love," said Purbright, "is forty-four."

The telephone rang. It was Braine.

"PC Phillips is on the line," he announced. "There's been an accident at Pennick and he thinks you ought to know about it."

"What kind of an accident? I do happen to be rather busy." Purbright never found it very difficult to suspect Braine of deliberate unhelpfulness.

"Accident—that's all he says. He wants to talk to you about it. Whatever it is. Sir."

Purbright said he would take the call. Braine pressed the wrong switch and lost the line. "He's cut off," he explained. Soon afterwards Phillips rang again and was put through.

"I'm out at Pennick at the moment, sir. We had a call about twenty minutes ago from the lock-keeper. There's a body in the lock. The keeper thinks it floated in last time he opened the doors for some boats going up river."

"Does Sergeant Malley know about this?"

"He's not in, sir."

"No, of course. I'll get a message round to him. But I'm told you wanted especially to talk to me."

"Yes, sir. I thought you'd be interested in this impression I got." Phillips sounded now more hopeful than confident. "Yes, naturally," said Purbright, at once.

"Well, sir, I've not actually seen this body—not close up, it keeps circling more or less under the surface—but I do get an impression that it's the same bloke that I saw outside the saleroom on Thursday, the one who assaulted Sid Love."

There was a pause.

"Tell me, Mr Phillips; if the lock-keeper was aware of the body twenty minutes ago, when you say his call was received here, why has nobody fished the thing out of the water?"

"It's a bit unfortunate, actually, sir. He lent his only boathook to the Strawbridge man last week and he's not got it back yet. The lad's cycling over now to fetch it."

By the time Purbright and Bradley arrived at the lock-side at Pennick, the lock-keeper, Phillips and three men from a narrow boat that had moored above the lock were fishing for the corpse with an improvised grapple.

It was not an easy task. The lock was full, but there was still some turbulence beneath the surface and the body was circling in a grotesque, nerveless waltz at constantly changing depths. The keeper, a fat and florid man named Gort, held a long rope, to the end of which had been lashed two meat hooks, donated for the occasion by the crew of the narrow boat. The hope was that a lucky throw of the rope would sink the hooks a little beyond the body so that a deft pull-in might enable one or both to catch the clothing.

Acting as commentator and range-finder in this operation was PC Phillips from a point of vantage on the little handrailed bridge that spanned the basin. Already he had mastered, on Gort's tuition, such appropriate references as up-river and down-river and had even tried out a couple of athwarts, though he lacked the boldness to emulate the keeper's familiar and frequent use of "Belay".

The two inspectors found themselves standing on something very similar to the platform of a country railway station, except that below its scrupulously white-washed edge was water instead of rails and sleepers. The words PENNICK LOCK were proclaimed in white letters on a blackboard, much in the manner of the old station names, while at intervals along the stone-flagged quay were polished bollards, curiously suggestive of stout little porters spaced out in expectation of a train. Wallflowers and marigolds grew in white and green painted tubs and troughs, and their rich scents overlay the brackish smell of the water.

Mr Gort was proud of his lock and his present uncharacteristic outlay of energy was inspired less by a sense of public duty than by the wish to see it tidy again.

Purbright watched him make a cast. He set the hooks spinning on a short length of rope. Phillips called out: "About three feet from the far wall. Half a fathom. A point up-river from your opposite bollard." Gort released his hold. The hooks flew up, then down, trailing the rope. A double plop.

"Bloody good shot!" Phillips had one arm aloft. "Hang on...I'll tell you when... Right-now!" And the arm flashed down.

Purbright and Bradley peered into the water but could see only dark undulating patterns.

"You've got him! You have, you've got him. Gently, now. One of

them's caught in his coat, I think." Phillips was pacing sideways along the bridge, towards them, not taking his eyes from the water beneath.

Very slowly the keeper drew in the dripping line. It was neither taut nor slack. His mouth, half open, framed a pink tongue tip, trembling with concentration. He was sweating.

Bradley squatted dose to the edge, ready to assist. Purbright, half kneeling beside him, put one arm around a bollard and braced himself experimentally.

For the first time they discerned the body in the greenish, clouded depths. The face, very white, flat, curiously idiotic, was distorted by surface corrugations into the semblance of muscular movement like the face of a man making sullen complaint behind a locked glass door.

"It's Frankie, all right," Bradley declared.

Purbright nodded. However unhappily transformed those features now appeared, they undoubtedly were those of the late contender for Whippy Arnold's worldly goods.

Chapter Ten

Edna O'Dwyer arrived next day on the only train running on a Sunday from London to Flaxborough. She was met by Policewoman Sadie Bellweather, taken to the mortuary at the General Hospital, and thence to the little cave-like room at Fen Street in which the coroner's officer cobbled upon a big, old-fashioned typewriter the statements of those he liked to call his customers.

For ten minutes or so Sergeant Malley set himself to comfort rather than question the witness. She was as much upset as might have been expected after the view of a consort not only waxenly indifferent to her but disfigured by a rash of little mauve pock marks.

It was the marks that seemed chiefly to bother her. They extended over the face and upper chest of the corpse in an even pattern. Who or what had done that to Frank? Had he caught something and died of it? Had the doctors made the marks? Or had somebody else? What *were* they?

The plump, bucolic Sadie had soothed the questions away with promises of future enlightenment from higher authority. Now Edna besought Malley to tell her what had happened.

The sergeant sent for tea. Then he wound paper into his typewriter, took a few exploratory finger-pecks at the keys, half-turned to face Edna and leaned a little forward. He seemed now to have plenty of time, but he gave at once what answer he could to her central worry.

"We don't know very much at the moment, Mrs O'Dwyer, but it does look as if there was a gun involved. A shotgun. The marks are almost certainly pellet wounds."

He watched her for signs of shock or outrage. But the big, tear-streaked face showed no change, save for a deepening of its tiredness. "Not a disease, then," she said.

"No, no, not a disease, Mrs O'Dwyer."

She sniffed and nodded. After a little while, she asked: "What's this about drownding?"

"It's true that your husband's body was in the river, but we don't actually know the cause of death. There'll have to be what we call a post-mortem. It's just a sort of medical examination."

"What, cut him about, you mean?" The eyes were wide, scared. "They want to open him up?"

The sergeant very gently shook his head and glanced down at the massive reassurance of his own unopened-up flesh. "No more than's absolutely necessary: don't you go getting upset about that. We have to know what caused your husband's death." He regarded her in silence a moment. "You want that, too, don't you? To know. Not knowing is worse, love."

Staring past him, she felt with a finger knuckle the edges of her parted teeth, then made an almost unnoticeable movement of assent. Malley heaved himself round and gave his typewriter carriage an affectionate slap.

After Edna had deposed, with Malley's help, that the body she had been shown that morning was that of a man known to her, Edna Theresa Jupp, as Francis O'Dwyer, aged fifty-seven, of the same address as her own, where she had last seen him alive and in good health three days previously, she drank her tea, combed her yellow ringlets and was escorted by Policewoman Bellweather into the presence of Inspector Purbright.

A few moments later, Bradley joined them.

Edna stared, as at an old friend unaccountably transposed. Then she wept afresh. Bradley put an arm round her shoulder. Purbright fetched a chair.

Between sobs, Edna asked who would want to shoot her Frankie. Bradley noticed with mild interest that several scars about her face and neck gleamed more whitely in contrast with the flush of emotion.

"Can *you* think of anybody, Mrs O'Dwyer?" Purbright asked.

She shook her head.

Bradley spoke. "What was he doing up here, Edna? Have you no idea?"

She looked up at him as if the displacement of persons were now general and therefore not to be questioned. "Frankie was on business,"

she said, simply.

"What kind of business?"

"He had a shop-fitting business. You know that, Mr Bradley. Since the watch-repairing packed in. Anyway, you've got the letter I gave you. That says why he was here."

"To attend an auction sale," said Bradley.

"That's right. You got the letter."

"But Mrs O'Dwyer," said Purbright, "the letter about the sale was addressed to someone called Charles Chubb."

"Oh, yes. Yes, it was." She paused. "That's his business name. Uses it in business."

"I see. So the man the letter was about—he's dead now but he was called Arnold, remember—was a business acquaintance, was he?"

"I suppose he must have been. He'd had letters from him before. Frankie had, I mean."

"Did you happen to see any of those letters, Mrs O'Dwyer?"

Instead of answering Purbright, she looked nervously at Bradley. "Well, I..."

"It's all right, Edna. Nobody's going to hurt you."

She turned again to Purbright. "There weren't many. About three, perhaps, all told. That's as many as I saw." Defensively, she added: "He's a terror for leaving things about."

They led her over the dim, almost featureless ground of her recollection of O'Dwyer's correspondence. The letters seemed to have been of an unvarying hope-this-finds-you-as-it-leaves-me-at-present uninformativeness. Just like any other letters, she explained. It was not a field in which Edna had very high hopes, apparently.

Did any money pass? Ah, now, she did get that impression, now that the inspector mentioned it. She'd once glimpsed notes, and after the arrival of other letters Frankie had been flush for a bit. He was very good about housekeeping when he was home.

Purbright forestalled the further tears that this memory threatened to set flowing. "Picture," he said very firmly, and raised a finger. "That letter you gave Mr Bradley was about some things that included a picture. Your husband knew all about it, according to Mr Anderson. And the owner of the picture—Mr Arnold—is supposed to have wanted your husband to have it. I want you to think very carefully, Mrs O'Dwyer, and see if you can remember anything that you may have heard from your husband, or seen in a letter, about a picture. Take your time and make yourself comfortable. Mr Bradley and I will be back very shortly, then we can talk about your fares and somewhere to stay and that sort of thing."

In the corridor, Purbright and Bradley encountered Sergeant Love. He was carrying a rectangular parcel and looking pleased.

Love handed the parcel to Purbright. “I think it’s that cottage of mine. Forensic sent it over by car. Just arrived.”

Purbright was about to re-enter his own office, but changed his mind. He led Bradley and Love to an interview room on the ground floor.

In the parcel were the framed plaster-cast, wrapped in polythene; three small, transparent envelopes, in two of which were fragments of plaster and in the third a yellow, metallic clip; and a long, sealed manilla envelope, addressed to Purbright.

This he opened at once and read the single sheet of typescript it contained. The report was short.

“Hardly sensational, but quite intriguing.” He handed the sheet to Bradley.

For Love’s benefit, Purbright summarized the laboratory findings while he examined in detail the parcel’s contents.

“They aren’t very complimentary about the art work, I’m afraid, Sid. They consider it was cast in a rubber mould ‘of the kind obtainable in department stores’ and then ‘crudely coloured’. Never mind, they did X-ray the thing. And this”—he held up the metal object—“is what they found.”

Love looked, rather sulkily.

“Gold,” said Purbright. “Part of a necklace fastening. They can’t date it accurately, but it’s not modern. And these strands still knotted to it are silk, apparently—again, not modern. They say the quality of the fastening suggests quite expensive jewellery.”

Bradley finished reading. He watched as Purbright turned the cast over and indicated a small, square shaped excavation.

“This is where they chiselled down to get the little gold piece out. See envelope ‘A’—‘common plaster, household grade’. But here”—and Purbright pointed to a second hole in the back of the cast—“is a very odd discovery. See envelope ‘B’—‘superfine plaster, dental or surgical grade’.”

Bradley took the cast in his hands and angled it to catch the light from the window. He nodded. “The difference is quite obvious.”

Purbright outlined with his finger a patch of plaster paler and smoother than the rest. It accounted for about a third of the area. He gave Bradley an inquiring glance. “Dug out and refilled.”

“It would seem so.”

Curiosity was beginning to act as balm upon Love’s wounded artistic sensibility. “The odds are,” he said, “that this was a secret cache.”

“Mmmm,” said Purbright, wide-eyed.

“Containing?” Bradley asked the sergeant, in a tone of kindly encouragement.

Love pointed without hesitation at the gold clip. “The rest of that necklace.” A pause, then, not quite so confidently: “Wouldn’t you say?”

Purbright patted his arm. “Easily the best suggestion up to now.”

Whereupon the sergeant was dispatched to organize, as best he might on a Sunday, something systematic in the way of inquiries into how O’Dwyer may have come to be in the river.

“How did you get on with our chief constable?” Purbright asked Bradley, when they were alone.

Bradley seemed at first to avoid answering. “You know, I’m terribly sorry,” he said, earnestly, “that our wretched Frankie chose to end his undistinguished career in this area. You deserved better. And now there’s all this embarrassment. Understandably.”

Purbright smiled faintly. He waited.

Bradley smiled too. “Rather nice fellow, I thought, old Chubb. He has that kind of courtesy that self-confidence allows one to afford but he doesn’t let it seem patronizing.”

“He doesn’t care much for this case, does he?” Purbright said. “Hence the look of pained regret.”

“I thought perhaps he had a hernia.”

“No, no; it is just that he considers crime—which he much deplores, incidentally—to be a defect peculiar to the working class. On this occasion, respectable people appear to be implicated.”

“Unwillingly, surely?”

“Oh, yes. Perhaps innocently. But there is an involvement. That worries Chubb, and he reacts by pretending to be stupid.”

“Does that mean he will be obstructive?”

Purbright shook his head. “Oh, no, just heavily dubious. You will get used to it. And on our part, we spare him the pain of knowing in advance the sensitive areas we mean to incise.” He glanced at his watch. “The Moldham squirearchy, for instance.”

They went back to Purbright’s office. Edna was drinking more tea and talking about Southend-on-Sea to Policewoman Bellweather.

Purbright showed Edna the plaster cast. “That’s pretty,” she said. Her eyes were blank.

Purbright enfolded the picture loosely in its wrapping and put it aside. He did not bother to put to her the question he had had in mind.

Bradley had been considering something. He spoke to the woman. “Edna, you remember Frankie did a bit of dealing in second-hand jewellery and that kind of thing in his watch-repairing days?”

She looked up at him, warily. “Well, sort of...”

“Did his friend Mr Arnold ever send him anything in that line?”

She shook her head. The ringlets quivered like brass springs. “Not

that I know of. But he wasn't forced to tell me, Mr Bradley, was he?"

Purbright said: "No, but you've said already that your husband was a terror for leaving things about."

She smiled. "That's true. I never saw no jewels, though. Anyway"—her manner sharpened—"they'd have come registered. And nothing ever came registered." Wistfully, again, " 'Cept summonses."

There was a knock. Malley entered. He spoke close to Purbright's ear.

"They're doing the PM now. Heineman's secretary rang me from the General."

Purbright drew Malley a little aside. "Lead or water, do you think, Bill?" he asked softly.

The sergeant's huge shoulders rose fractionally. "Wouldn't bet either way, but the odds are on drowning. Some of the gunshot wounds look pretty superficial to me."

"Inquest opening tomorrow morning, then?"

"Aye," said Malley, and departed.

Sadie Bellweather undertook to find Edna some lodgings. They left together.

"A fence, was he?" Purbright asked. He waited for Bradley to pass him into the corridor, then shut, but did not lock, the door.

"Frankie? Oh, yes, he tried receiving for a short time, but he had no head for business, whatever poor old Edna may believe."

Purbright led the way towards the staircase. "Living with so inept a criminal must have put a fairly severe strain on her loyalty."

"Inept, yes—but consistently vicious, don't forget. It was that which commanded the loyalty. And the admiration."

They spoke no more until the spiral stair had been successfully negotiated. Then Purbright indicated the direction of the CID room. "We'll take a posse. Show of strength."

"I thought," said Bradley, "that the landed gentry had too much sang-froid to be intimidated by numbers."

"Oh, that's true," Purbright conceded, "but what I'm hopeful of is that so long as they are showing their sang-froid in the drawing room, they won't get round to practise intimidation of their own elsewhere on the estate."

"What, would you say, is Mr Chubb's attitude?"

Purbright, about to open the door of the CID room, glanced at Bradley. "In his capacity as chief constable? He fully supports me, warrant and all. Or do you mean privately?"

"Yes, I do."

Purbright grinned. "He thinks I'm a cad."

Chapter Eleven

Two cars were needed for what Mrs Moldham-Clegg was to call the quite unwarrantable foray by the Flaxborough police. In the first were Purbright and Bradley and two detectives, Wilkinson and Harper. Three uniformed constables sat in the second, looking stiff and self-conscious.

Having passed slowly in procession through the secondary entrance to the Hall, the ungated driveway reserved for tradesmen, the two cars drew to a halt on the patch of gravel before the house at a discreet distance from its shabby front door.

The seven policemen climbed out and assembled in a group. Those in uniform at once donned helmets, each by a similar procedure of holding his helmet like a basin before his lowered head, as if about to bathe a scalp wound, then tipping both head and helmet up and back in unison.

Purbright could be seen talking and pointing, in the manner of the official guide to some stately home. Heads and helmets bobbed now and again in acknowledgement of his instructions. He paused. There were questions. Then the group split into ones and twos. Several began to make their way towards the sides and back of the house. One man in uniform pulled from his pocket a tape-measure the size of a tea cake. Harper had a camera; he glanced up at the sky and licked a finger.

Purbright and Bradley approached the front door. Today it looked to be closed.

"In London," said Bradley, "one of the indications for which you instinctively look on occasions like this is the bottle of milk on the doorstep. I presume it would not be appropriate here."

"Not at the *front* door," Purbright agreed. "For signs and portents, one would approach the back."

He gave a knock with the immaculately polished brass ring.

Bradley peered at it admiringly. They waited, Purbright knocked again.

As upon his former visit, response came not from within the house but from behind them. It was Bradley who first heard the chop of hooves into gravel. He glanced back and at once tugged Purbright's sleeve. Looming over them was a horse that appeared to Bradley to be as big as a London bus. And perched atop the great beast, distant but obviously secure and undismayed, was a little woman with a weather-beaten face and a hat like a coal heaver's.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Moldham-Clegg." Purbright raised his own, less flamboyant, hat. Bare-headed Bradley made a neat bow and looked the horse in the eye, which was huge, moist, brown and

incredibly gentle.

"Good afternoon," said Mrs Moldham-Clegg. Her voice was quite firm, but it seemed to be reaching them from another county. Bradley glanced round the porch for possibly sanctuary should the horse decide to be assertive.

"Is Colonel Moldham at home?" inquired Purbright.

"Why do you wish to see him?"

Counter-questions in this tone and at this altitude had, Purbright well knew, thwarted inquiries at Moldham Hall since the Conquest. He did not make the mistake of attempting self-justification.

"If he is not at home, ma'am, I think you may do just as well. At this stage, anyway."

The woman made no move to dismount. She stared down coldly. "You are...?"

Purbright regarded the landscape with mild affability and recited, to no one in particular: "My name is Purbright. Detective Inspector Purbright. I am making inquiries into matters concerning the death of a Mr Francis Dean O'Dwyer and believe that you may be able to help me with those inquiries."

"Last time," Mrs Moldham-Clegg said, incautiously, "it was something to do with a policeman having been assaulted."

"So it was," Purbright agreed, still staring into the distance. He became aware of someone approaching from the right. It was the old odd-jobs man. Benton halted a few yards off and stood waiting.

It was Inspector Bradley who fractured the ice in which the whole scene seemed threatened to become set.

Cheerily, he addressed the horse.

"Now, then, old chap. And what does your mistress call you? Trigger?"

Whether it was the horse that jumped, or Mrs Moldham-Clegg, was not clear, but only the prompt reaction of Mr Benton, who seized the bridle, restored calm.

The rider, her face very tight, climbed down.

"All right, Benton; you may take Churchill back to his box."

The old man hesitated. "Beggin' your pardon, but there's some fellers round the back pokin' about."

Purbright intervened. "Those are police officers, Mrs Moldham-Clegg, and they do have authority to be here."

"Not mine, Mr Purbright."

"In the present circumstances, it is your co-operation rather than your authority that we shall value, ma'am. I am sure that Colonel Moldham, as a magistrate, would appreciate that."

To Benton, Mrs Moldham-Clegg gave a dismissive nod. He ambled off, leading Churchill. She took a latchkey from the pocket of her

riding jacket and made for the door.

"My nephew is elsewhere on the estate. Perhaps you had better come in and explain what all this nonsense is about."

Instead of the big white-painted room to which Purbright had been admitted on his former visit, he and Bradley now found themselves in one that was only slightly smaller but a good deal darker and more shabby. The walls were papered in a churchyard green, marked off in panels by faint gold lines. One wall was disfigured by a mould-dappled patch of damp shaped like a map of India. The recess at each side of the broad chimney-breast had been sealed off with panelled doors painted dark brown. There was a very old harmonium in the room; also a squat square safe, the indentations in whose green paint showed it to be an eighth of an inch thick.

Mrs Moldham-Clegg seated herself on a music stool with her back to the harmonium. She did not take off her hat. Purbright and Bradley selected seats for themselves from half a dozen Victorian dining chairs ranged along one wall, and brought them forward.

Purbright made formal introduction of his London colleague, who was forthwith stared at and asked: "And which Bradleys would *they* be?" rather as if he had cropped up in a seed catalogue.

"Hounslow," proclaimed Bradley, loudly and without hesitation.

The old woman's lip twitched with the briefest of smiles and the parchment-like lid lowered a fraction over one eye. She hmm'd reflectively and said: "Your conversation with Churchill led me to suppose it would be somewhere like Arizona. However..."

Stern once more and erect, she turned to Purbright.

"Now, inspector, your explanation, please."

The chair seat was covered in a sort of woven horse-hair; it was glassily cold and as yielding as a slab of anthracite. Even the furniture, Purbright thought to himself, was under instruction to be inhospitable until further notice.

"I think," he began, "that your best way of receiving an explanation is to let it emerge in the course of our putting questions to you.

"For instance, when I ask if you have any personal knowledge of the man Francis Dean O'Dwyer, it will be clear to you that a connection of some kind between O'Dwyer and this place does, in our opinion, exist. Shall we proceed from that point?"

"I have never heard of a man of such a name," declared Mrs Moldham-Clegg.

Purbright nodded. "The name perhaps does not matter. He had others. Mr Bradley will show you a photograph."

Silently, Bradley passed a print. The old woman regarded it stonily and handed it back. "No one of my acquaintance," she said.

A smile from Purbright. “Not in a social sense, perhaps. But are you sure you have never seen the man before? At the auction sale on Thursday, for instance? Or in the early hours of the following morning when he was engaged in breaking into your house?”

“Again this nonsense about a burglary. There has been no burglary, Mr Purbright. No one has broken into the house. If anyone had, I assure you the police would have been notified.”

“And if I were to tell you that fingerprints of the man O’Dwyer have been found on pieces of glass from the window on the ground floor here that was broken Thursday night, would you be surprised, ma’am?”

“Not particularly.”

There was a pause. Then Bradley spoke.

“Why not, Mrs Moldham-Clegg?”

“Because I have better things to do than express surprise for the edification of policemen. I know nothing about fingerprints. For all I know, they blow about like dandelion clocks.”

“Mr Benton,” said Purbright, “was in no uncertainty regarding a break-in. He spoke of ‘the burglar’ almost familiarly.”

“Mr Benton,” retorted Mrs Moldham-Clegg, “is not always a very reliable old gentleman. You would probably find, if you were to speak to him today, that he has a completely different set of fancies.”

“Yet you keep him on?” Bradley remarked.

“Certainly, inspector. One does not dispense with one’s people’s services simply on account of age or even a little eccentricity.”

Bradley seemed to find the point interesting. He leaned a little forward. “Mr Arnold, though—he went into retirement pretty early, didn’t he? Or so I understand.”

Mrs Moldham-Clegg looked bewildered. Nothing was said for several moments. Then she frowned angrily, not at Bradley but at Purbright.

“I cannot imagine what relevance your friend’s question is supposed to bear to the matter in hand. Perhaps you could enlighten me, Mr Purbright?”

Purbright spoke soothingly. “We are just trying to assemble a number of loose ends; I’m sorry if you find some of them confusing. Let us first dispose of the man whose photograph Inspector Bradley showed you. Did you not see him during Thursday’s auction sale?”

“I did not. On these occasions, one is too busy watching the auctioneer to stare around at other bidders.”

“We did not say he was bidding,” observed Bradley.

The old woman stared at him. “Of course you did. Don’t be so Agatha Christie.”

Purbright patiently assembled another question. “Early on Friday

morning—round about one o'clock, perhaps, were you awakened by an unusual noise, the sounds of a crudely conducted search downstairs, one that involved the forcing of locks?"

"I was awakened by nothing, Mr Purbright. If you did more riding, you would sleep better, I've no doubt."

"Not by the discharge of a firearm?" Purbright persisted.

"Twice?" added Bradley.

Mrs Moldham-Clegg murmured a cross "Of course not!" The tone expressed her opinion that the inquisition was in danger of passing from the merely tiresome stage to one of actual bad taste.

"A shotgun was heard that night, you know," said Purbright, carefully, "and all I..."

"Now, now, now—you have had a fair innings, inspector. Let me just put a question to you. No, two questions. What are all those men hoping to accomplish by swarming over my land? And when, pray, are you going to have the courtesy to return the property you saw fit to seize?"

The "swarm", it had to be admitted, was not accomplishing very much. Some outbuildings had been examined, several yards of gravel sifted in search of shotgun pellets, and tests for blood made here and there. Benton had been asked by Detective Constable Harper to make a statement relative to burglary and gunshots, and had rendered a passable impersonation of a Fijian Islander suffering from amnesia. Areas of undergrowth, explored by zealous PC Phillips, had yielded several trails that might have been caused by a dragged body—or a large foraging dog—or anything. He further established that the nearest point at which the estate afforded access to the river was a quarter of a mile away.

Not until the inspectors' substantially abortive interview with Mrs Moldham-Clegg was nearly over did anything patently significant reward the searchers.

The find was made by Wilkinson. He had made an excursion of his own into the private avenue, gated at the road end, that Purbright had used on his first visit. Twenty or thirty yards from the house he noticed that the grass between two of the trees flanking the overgrown driveway was flattened and that a patch of soil was scored with wheel tracks. A car had been backed and turned there, and very recently.

Wilkinson returned to the Hall to recruit the aid of PC Johnson, who had been designated the expedition's plaster man. Thwarted so far by absence of footprints ("What do you expect on bloody gravel?" Harper had observed, unhelpfully), Johnson gathered up bag, bowl, bottle and trowel with new cheerfulness and trotted off with Wilkinson to make casts of tyre marks. They also picked a few late violets for Mrs Johnson.

It was then that Wilkinson saw, trodden into the grass, a rectangular piece of pink paper. It was grimy but unfaded. He turned it over and pressed it flat against his thigh. “Receipt,” said Johnson, looking on.

“Oil,” said Wilkinson. The ticket had been issued by the Century Service Station, Chalmsbury. He frowned at the pencilled date, then saw what it was. “Twenty-seventh—when was that?”

“Thursday.”

Wilkinson was frowning again. “Lot of oil, isn’t it, four litres?”

“I’d have thought so.” Johnson had turned his main attention to the bunch of violets. “Looks as if he splashed some around here. Filthy sod.” Fastidiously, he picked out two of the little flowers and threw them away, Wilkinson put the receipt into his notebook and made another survey of the ground. He nodded once or twice. “Black,” he said. “Must have been leaking from the engine.”

When they got back to the house they found Purbright standing outside by a window that seemed to be the subject of a conversation he was having with the inspector from London.

“He didn’t need to leave fingerprints, poor old Frank,” Bradley was saying. “He really was a rotten burglar.” He pressed his forehead against the glass and peered at the battered bureau. “Oh, God, yes. Typical.”

They turned round on hearing the approach of the detective and the constable. Wilkinson produced his notebook and made something of a ceremony out of extracting the pink sales slip by the very tip of one corner. He recounted their discoveries while Johnson stood by modestly and kept three fingers in the breast pocket of his tunic to ventilate the violets.

Purbright let the two men see him look pleased: occasions for showing encouragement, he suspected, were going to be rare today.

Chapter Twelve

In response to earnest representations by the chief constable, augmented by the advice of Mr Richard Loughbury, Colonel Moldham presented himself at Fen Street police headquarters at four o’clock. Mr Loughbury accompanied him.

Mr Chubb and Inspectors Purbright and Bradley were waiting in the chief constable’s office, to which a tea-tray was borne by Policewoman Bellweather immediately after the guests’ arrival. There were five cups and saucers on the tray, three of them matching. The tea had been brewed from a packet fetched especially from Hobley’s

store, on the corner of Priory Lane, which kept open until six on Sundays, and because it was an expensive blend it was very stale.

Greetings were dispensed in accordance with personality and social eminence.

"Good afternoon, colonel," the chief constable said to the squire of Moldham; then, in parenthesis, but courteously enough, "Afternoon, Richard," to Rich Dick.

Colonel Moldham responded with a slight inclination of the head and "Afternoon, Chubb." He acknowledged the presence of the two inspectors by splitting a brief, rather worried, stare between them and murmuring, "Gentlemen."

They stared back, but without sign of worry. "Colonel," said Purbright. Bradley said nothing.

For each policeman, the solicitor had brought one of his broadest smiles. Purbright's was inscribed *Don't-worry-we'll-get-it-all-sorted-out*; and Bradley's *Bit-diferent-from-London-eh?* There was even one for Chubb, as well as the sonorous "Good afternoon, Mr Chief Constable," that Loughbury delivered with every appearance of enjoying it himself.

The chief constable indicated his view of the seriousness of the occasion by breaking with habit and actually sitting down. He addressed the others.

"I regret to tell you, gentlemen, that something has happened in Flaxborough which we have no choice but to regard as a possible case of murder. Naturally, I make no judgment myself at this stage, but you will appreciate, I am sure, that we are bound to make prompt and diligent inquiries into every circumstance that seems relevant.

"My officers have already initiated those inquiries, and, as is only natural, some of them have been received with a little resentment—no, not resentment—a little bewilderment, should I say? Understandably. Oh, yes: understandably. It is always the same on these occasions. And may I say that the police dislike having to ask searching and sometimes embarrassing questions quite as much as members of the public might dislike answering them."

Rich Dick pursed his mouth and nodded several times. Colonel Moldham gazed without expression at an empty chair on the other side of the room. Purbright wondered flippantly if Mr Chubb were about to propose a vote of thanks to the squire for having turned up.

Instead, the chief constable presented a reasonably succinct account of events at Thursday's auction sale, of such subsequent movements of O'Dwyer as had been deduced from evidence, and of the recovery of his body from Pennick lock. He offered no speculation as to why O'Dwyer had come to the district and he did not mention the interview with Crutchy Anderson.

Nor did Mr Chubb make any reference to Veronica Moldham-Clegg to which her closest friend, let alone her nephew and her man of law, might object.

Mr Loughbury was quick to cap the chief constable's resume with the general observation that the matter had been put in a nutshell and that certain previously puzzling aspects either were now plain or would be made so in the course of the next day or so. Whereupon Rich Dick looked across at his client and gave a shall-we-go? lift to his eyebrows.

But Colonel Moldham's tired and chilly regard was elsewhere. He was listening to Purbright's first question.

It was a singularly direct one.

"Colonel, did you kill Francis Dean O'Dwyer?"

Rich Dick's smile faded. The chief constable glanced at his nails. Bradley's eyes remained wide and innocent, like those of an onlooker at a somewhat erudite quiz game. Moldham alone seemed to find the question perfectly normal, almost commonplace. He replied without hesitation.

"I did not."

"But you did shoot the man?"

"I concede that that is possible."

"Do you not *know*, sir?"

"Allow me to put it this way, inspector. An unauthorized person —a man, as I believe—had come upon my property in the hours of darkness. He did not answer my challenge. I aimed my gun at a point above where I judged him to be hiding..."

"A shotgun, colonel?" The interjection was Mr Chubb's.

"Naturally, a shotgun. Twelve bore. I fired one barrel. He ran off; a little later I heard a car drive away. He must have left it ready in the Church Avenue—that's the old carriageway, as you know."

"And you did not then know who the man was," said Purbright. "But you have now learned, have you not, that the fingerprints on pieces of glass from the window where he forced an entry have been identified as those of a man called Francis Dean O'Dwyer?"

"So I understand. Whoever he might be."

"You have never heard of him?"

"Never."

Colonel Moldham was probably as relaxed as his customary bearing allowed him to be, but Loughbury glanced at him occasionally as if he were on the alert to prompt his client should it prove necessary. Bradley noticed. He slipped in a question of his own.

"In your capacity as chairman of the board of management, do you not consider it an interesting coincidence that the intruder at Moldham Hall had earlier intruded violently upon an inmate of

Twilight Close?"

Moldham stiffened and frowned but made no reply.

Rich Dick stared at Bradley with ostensibly good-natured reproval and said: "You know, Mr Bradley, I find the implication of that question very difficult to follow. I do hope that Colonel Moldham is not expected to enter some sort of defence in this regard. Suppose it transpires that the late Mr O'Dwyer had a fight that night in, say, the White Bear public house: would my client then be required to justify his directorship of Flaxborough Breweries?"

This humorous hypothesis seemed to please everybody, especially Mr Loughbury.

Purbright resumed the questioning.

"When I called at your home on Friday morning, sir, I was shown and removed for examination a piece of towelling that had been found in the courtyard. Do you—or Mr Loughbury, perhaps—wish to see it?"

The colonel shrugged indifferently. His solicitor, though, leaned across the table. Purbright placed in his hand the polythene-wrapped towel. Loughbury stared at it gravely and handed it back.

"The laundry code shows it to be one of the towels issued to the residents of Twilight Close," said Purbright. "As you can see, it is quite heavily blood-stained. Have you an explanation of how it came to be lying by your garage?"

"No. I certainly did not put it there."

"There is a point regarding the gun which I should like to be clear about, sir. Mr Benton says he heard two shots, not one."

"He may well have done. I fired the second barrel when the fellow ran off."

"To frighten him, of course," interposed Rich Dick.

Purbright looked at the colonel. "*Just* to frighten him, sir?"

"I didn't shoot *at* the chap, if that's what you mean."

"You say he ran off, colonel. How far would you say he ran?"

Loughbury made dissenting noises. The inspector had heard it was dark; how could he expect anyone to judge distance, particularly in a moment of stress?

"The roughest approximation would be helpful," Purbright replied. "The colonel has told us that he heard O'Dwyer drive away. I had hoped that he could estimate—even in the darkness—how far off the car was when O'Dwyer reached it and started the engine, as he doubtless lost no time in doing."

This time Moldham was left to answer on his own. He said the car sounded fairly distant, perhaps a couple of hundred yards down the old carriageway.

This seemed to satisfy Purbright. Bradley, invited to put his own choice of supplementary questions, shook his head.

Rich Dick interpreted this to signal the end of the interview. He placed the tips of his fingers on the table before him and leaned forward in preparation to rise. Mr Chubb looked similarly inclined.

"Now," said Purbright, "we come to the question of why O'Dwyer came to this part of the country and in particular what his object was in breaking into Moldham Hall."

The solicitor subsided back into his seat and began to stroke his clean, white moustache with the end of his little finger. Mr Chubb's gaze wandered to the window: a sign, though still a mild one, of diminishing approval.

"Was any of your property taken, colonel?" Purbright asked.

"No, nothing whatever."

"Yet there was damage suggestive of a search inside the house, was there not?" The question was a small open door, through which Moldham might jettison his earlier dissimulation. He did so.

"A bureau was forced open, and some drawers and a cupboard ransacked. As," he added, "your chaps found when they went over the place yesterday."

"Do you recall," Purbright went on, "employing on the estate a man named Frederick Arnold some years ago?"

"Yes, I do." Cautious, but unsurprised. "Quite a long time back. Why?"

"Your aunt was anxious to buy something that had belonged to Anold, sir. So, for some reason, was O'Dwyer. Our conjecture is that he believed her to have been successful, and that he determined to steal it. Do you find that a reasonable theory, sir?"

"On the contrary, I find it nonsensical. The truth is that my aunt wished to make a contribution to Arnold's dependents and she devised, with Loughbury here, a little scheme to that end." He turned to the solicitor. "You did explain to the officer, did you not?"

Rich Dick nodded. "To his subordinate, yes. But, perhaps..."

"Detective Sergeant Love did report the conversation to me," Purbright confirmed. "However, it does not account for O'Dwyer's intervention at the sale. He, quite dearly, considered Arnold's odds and ends well worth bidding into the hundreds of pounds. Why, sir?"

For the first time Colonel Moldham showed sign of irritation.

"You should be able to answer better than I, Purbright. You took possession of the wretched things, and I don't doubt they have been all but pulverized by this time."

"No, sir," Purbright said, quietly. "Every care has been taken. The tests have involved no damage to which Mrs Moldham-Clegg could take exception."

The chief constable ventured to intervene. "I must admit, colonel, to finding myself a little in sympathy with my investigating officers.

Mr Purbright mentioned this scheme of your aunt's to me earlier. Quite frankly, I thought it eccentric."

"She is an old lady," said Moldham, dryly.

Mr Chubb fluttered an understanding hand. "Yes, yes, yes, we do appreciate that, naturally." He pondered a moment, then tried again. "She was fond of this old servant, was she? A sort of...well, family retainer relationship?"

"You might express it in those terms, I suppose."

"The family was paying Mr Arnold a pension, in fact, was it not, colonel?" Purbright asked.

"The estate made him certain *ex gratia* payments."

"Which he accepted?" This from Bradley.

"Certainly he did. They would scarcely have been payments if he hadn't accepted them."

Bradley nodded pleasantly. "No. True."

"This little scheme of your aunt's..." Purbright paused.

"Yes?"

"I presume she had been notified of Arnold's death..."

"Of course. Wellbeloved reported it to me."

"Ah, yes. But how did she learn of the impending sale of his personal property? Was Mr Wellbeloved a party to the scheme devised by Mrs Moldham-Clegg and Mr Loughbury?"

"I don't much care for that word 'party', Purbright. You made perfectly innocent little act of charity sound like a conspiracy." This time Moldham was clearly angry. Loughbury donned an amensely conciliatory smile and addressed Purbright.

"If I may just intervene a moment, gentlemen... Of course, the inspector is right to ask how Mrs Moldham-Clegg got to know about poor old Arnold's bits and pieces being put up for sale. And there is a simple answer. I told her." The smile broadened even further. "I happened, for my sins, to be the old chap's solicitor." He waited for this intelligence to take effect, then added: "So if any conspiring has gone on, it is I who must plead guilty."

Bradley looked as if he wanted to congratulate the solicitor. Rich Dick waited, gazing at him equably.

"As the late Mr Arnold's legal adviser," Bradley remarked, "you must have been professionally pained by the discovery that he died intestate."

Mr Loughbury sighed. "A stubborn old fellow, alas. And superstitious. If only people would realize what difficulties they bequeath heir relatives by failing to make simple provision..."

There was a short silence.

"Do you know Dr Gule, sir?" Purbright asked Colonel Moldham.

"Who?"

"Dr D. Gule. He attends patients at Twilight Close."

"I know him, yes. See him at committee meetings and so on. I don't know him socially, if that's what you mean."

Purbright's notebook had been lying before him, closed. He jnow opened it and glanced at a couple of pages.

"Anything further, Mr Purbright?" the chief constable prompted, softly but with distinct coolness.

"I don't think so, sir." The inspector shut and put away his book and glanced at his London colleague. Bradley shook his head.

"Good of you to come, colonel." Mr Chubb had risen, but did not offer Moldham his hand.

In a flurry of brisk geniality, Rich Dick covered the withdrawal of his client. The squire's face was blank, his farewells murmured monosyllables.

Purbright and Bradley did not leave at once, but resumed their seats while Mr Chubb stood at the window, gazing out.

He spoke without turning round.

"Bruce Moldharn doesn't take very kindly to this sort of thing, you know."

Purbright avoided Bradley's eye. "No, sir?"

There was a further silence. Then, "Shy chap," Mr Chubb said.

The chief constable crossed to the fireplace. He leaned lightly against the column supporting the mantel-shelf. "I suppose," he said to Bradley, "that you find our little mysteries rather tame after London crime."

"I find them more convoluted," said Bradley.

"Perhaps," suggested Mr Chubb, "we in the country need to be a little more..."—he sought a word—"...delicate in our investigating than would be appropriate in a big city." He smiled weakly. "One has to live with these people afterwards, you see."

"Not if one succeeds in sending them down the line. Not for the next few hunting seasons, anyway."

Purbright watched the chief constable examine his manicure. When Mr Chubb was pleased, he would hold his hand flat and pointing away from himself; displeasure always was signalled by his turning the hand over and doubling the fingers like a half-formed fist. This was how he was regarding his nails now.

"Oh, I don't think there is any question of sending Colonel Moldham, ah, down the line, Mr Bradley," said the chief constable, very quietly.

Purbright regarded Mr Chubb with what looked like controlled surprise. "He has admitted to shooting the man, sir."

"Only up to a point, Mr Purbright. He has not specifically confessed to it."

"He has not specifically confessed to telling lies," said Purbright, "but he has three or four sizeable ones to his credit already."

"Oh?"

"He lied originally about the break-in and about the incidental damage. Today he attempted to lie about the number of shots he fired. He went along with the patently absurd story of his aunt's charitable plot. And he contradicted Benton's account of O'Dwyer and the car by saying that the car had been left a fair way off, perhaps two hundred yards; Benton told me it was actually within the courtyard itself."

Mr Chubb pondered these inconsistencies for several moments, then looked at his watch.

He turned to Purbright, who already was rising to leave.

"I shall be at home from about seven o'clock onwards, you know. By all means telephone me if you need to."

Chapter Thirteen

Apart from tests upon those parts of him that had been abstracted and put into jars, the post-mortem upon Francis Dean O'Dwyer was over. Purbright went with Bradley and Sergeant Love to the General Hospital and met the secretary of the resident pathologist in a little room off the dispensary that once had been known as the matron's sitting room. The secretary, Miss Oolik, was said to have come from Iceland. She was prettily round-faced, wore spectacles big as a bicycle, and could take medical shorthand like mother's milk. Love regarded her with unqualified admiration.

"Ha, what a splendid fellow we had for this one, gents!" was her introduction. "Home office special." She perched on a high stool and twined long legs about it like the stems of a healthy house plant. "Whiskers, he had. Beaver." Pouting, she stroked her cheeks and chin. Love laughed.

Mackenzie, Purbright guessed. A gunshot specialist.

Miss Oolik peered into her notebook. "Now then, gents...I think, I think, I think well be finding something funny about this one...wait a moment, please." She flicked pages over, noisily, one neat foot jerking in time. Bradley watched the foot and some of the leg.

Miss Oolik took less than five minutes to extract the essential facts from her record of the doctors' running commentary upon their discoveries. Love jotted them down, aided every now and then by a considerate and charming pause on the part of the transcriber and even an occasional spelling-out that she managed to make sound so unpatronizing that Love felt by the end of the recital that he had been

permitted to assist at an important operation, scalpel, forceps and all.

"So he wasn't drowned," said Purbright, when Miss Oolik had finished.

She looked at him, then at Bradley. "So sorry. That is what you wanted?"

They smiled. So did Love. Then seriousness set in. Purbright recapitulated the main findings, as he recalled them, while the girl listened and nodded in confirmation.

No water had been found in the lungs, so death had taken place before the body entered the river. Such injuries as there were on the lower part of the body were superficial and attributable to striking obstructions after death. The man was well nourished and reasonably free of disease.

He had died of shock following the penetration of his brain by a foreign body, presumably a shotgun pellet, one of several which had lodged in the head and neck area. The distribution pattern of these pellets suggested that two cartridges had been discharged, at close-medium range, each from a different direction.

"What," Purbright asked Miss Oolik, "did you mean a little while ago by 'something funny about this one'?"

"You cannot see it?"

"I can see several odd things. I was only wondering if Dr Heineman—or Mackenzie, perhaps—had mentioned anything in particular."

She nodded. "It was Dr Mackenzie. Please, though, do not make songs about this until the proper report." Love unconsciously stiffened his jaw and shook his head. Purbright promised tactfulness.

Miss Oolik turned back several pages of her notes. She raised a finger. "Here we have it. You will remember? This strange fellow has no teeth."

Purbright looked slightly bewildered. "So? He probably had false ones."

Bradley said: "Dentures are quite easily lost. Vomiting can do it."

"Strangulation," added Purbright, without conviction. "Or blows on the head."

"The body had been knocked about in the river a bit," Bradley added.

The sergeant, who had the vague feeling that it would be disloyal, forebore from mentioning the case of his fiancée's father, who once had parted from his teeth simply by yawning in church.

Miss Oolik dismissed all this rationalization. "Not ever," she declared, "has a man—or a lady—been killed by a gunshot through the brain pan with loss of denture consequently. So has said Dr Mackenzie." She gave Purbright an almost envious look: "He is

making the point special in his report for you."

"I look forward to reading it."

Despite the smell of iodoform that lingered still upon the person of Miss Oolik, their departure from the neat, spinsterish little room, with its flowery wallpaper and chairs in matching covers, was more like the conclusion of a visit for tea than for an autopsy summary.

"What an obliging young woman," Bradley said.

A deeply preoccupied Purbright remained silent until they reached the main corridor on their way out of the hospital.

"Do you know anything about guns?" he asked Bradley.

"Not a great deal."

"Nor do I, but I should say that O'Dwyer was more than a little unlucky to have that one pellet get into where it mattered. The others didn't do much damage."

"Skulls do have unluckily thin bits sometimes. In Frankie's case, that would not surprise me in the least."

"The squire of Moldham would seem to me to be a better shot than the family retainer gave him credit for."

"You mean the old gentleman who has now lost his memory?"

"Benton, yes."

"Would he not be a better witness away from his tied cottage, or grace-and-favour residence?"

Gloomily, Purbright begged leave to doubt it.

They had almost reached the intersection with the corridor from the female geriatric wards when they were obliged to stand aside to make way for a procession that was rounding the corner and bearing down upon them.

It was led by a lady in a black-belted, square, dark blue dress, walking rather faster than her length of leg was designed for; and presenting in consequence an appearance of choleric determination, which was very alarming.

She was followed by two young women, their white coats a-swirl, in the leader's slip-stream. One bore a deep tray containing instruments and bottles; the other, a bundle of files.

In the centre of the parade was a figure whose most immediately noticeable feature was his style of locomotion, a sort of rolling prance. Holding his shabby sports-jacket close by keeping his hands in its pockets, he leaned forward as he advanced and peered ahead over half-moon spectacles in an attitude of perpetual diagnosis. The impression of rolling was given by a rather womanish, self-regarding sway of the hips. The feet, which were turned outward, made no sound whatever: they were small and encased in very soft shoes, plimsoles perhaps.

"Who's the ageing matinée idol?" Bradley whispered.

"Gule."

The procession was nearly level with them now. The rearguard became identifiable. It consisted of three junior doctors, two black, one white; and a woman physical therapist, much out of breath. All were in white coats. The doctors wore stethoscopes, displayed with meticulous carelessness.

Purbright moved forward. "Dr Gule, may I speak to you for a moment?"

The half-moon glasses swivelled instantly in his direction. No less swift was the consultant's diagnosis. Disgruntled patient, almost certainly National Health. He pranced on, scowling.

"Dr Gule," tried Purbright once more.

The woman in belted blue made a sudden U-turn, leaving the cavalcade to pursue its own way. She drew up beside Purbright, red-faced and vibrant. "What is it you want?" she whispered angrily.

Bradley leaned toward her in an attitude of confidentiality. "I think," he said, "that you've left your engine running, madam."

There was a moment of paralysis.

"Who *are* you?"

Before Bradley could exacerbate the situation, which he appeared eager to do, Purbright took control

"You know very well who I am, sister. This is Detective Inspector Bradley. We are here on official business and we wish to have a word with the doctor."

Outrage was gradually replaced by doubt. "He's a very busy man, Mr Purbright. Is it something important?"

"It is."

She pondered, then pointed herself in the direction taken by the cavalcade. "Stay here. I'll find out if he can see you for a momentt."

"Might I suggest you simply whisper the word 'fee' to him, madam?" was Bradley's parting advice. Purbright saw the sister's sternum jerk with indignation. "I devoutly trust," he said to Bradley, "that you will never need to enter here as a patient."

They stood waiting. A young nurse went by. She eyed them without curiosity and walked away up the long corridor, her shoes clacking loosely upon the gleaming floor. A male orderly, coming from the opposite direction, danced a few steps around the nurse and slapped her bottom. He was wearing white rubber boots and a Wild West marshal moustache. He winked ferociously as he passed the policemen.

The sister returned.

"Doctor will see you in a few minutes." She indicated the corridor junction. "Just go round the corner and wait. There are some seats there."

The seats proved to be a plastic-covered bench against the corridor wall. There were several doors nearby, unidentified except by numbers. “Which is the Vatican, I wonder,” mused Bradley. He went from one to another, listening against their panels, then shrugged and sat down.

Five minutes went by. Then another five. Traffic was not heavy. It consisted mainly of women patients, on their way, Purbright surmised, to a lavatory or a washroom. All seemed very old. Tented within the too-big, striped, hospital-issue dressing gowns, they looked incredibly tiny, with gentle, anxious eyes and brown, frond-like hands. They replied to his greeting with timid courtesy, as if uncertain whether they might have to pay.

At the end of quarter of an hour, Bradley went back to the doors. This time he began knocking on them and trying their handles. The first two revealed empty consulting rooms. He was about to broach the third.

“Whatever are you doing?”

It was the sister. She appeared genuinely surprised. Purbright spoke to her.

“Will you kindly tell Dr Gule that we insist on speaking to him at once.”

She looked from one to the other.

“Have you not seen him?”

Neither replied. She gave a little shake of the head.

“I’m afraid Doctor has left. He’s gone home.”

There was a long pause.

Then, as Purbright, grim-faced, was about to speak, Bradley gave him a meaningful glance before addressing the sister with an air of grave solicitude: “You understand, don’t you, sister, that we cannot divulge the reason for our wishing to interview Dr Gule?”

“Naturally.” Brusque. On her dignity. But curious.

Bradley smiled, nodded, turned away; then, as if on afterthought, back again.

“At least you might be able to help in a matter of perfectly innocent male inquisitiveness. When a lady—one of your nurses, say—leaves her handbag in a changing room or a ladies’ lavatory, would she leave money in it?”

The sister, almost too awed by the question’s implications to attempt an answer, said she supposed it would all depend.

“Ah,” said Bradley.

They took the Chalmsbury road after Purbright had telephoned Fen Street from a public box in the hospital grounds and told Love that until his return he might be reached at the Century Service Station, Benstone Road, Chalmsbury, or, later, at the home of Dr D.

Gule, Mill Lane, Chalmsbury.

It was sunny still and warm when they reached the southern outskirts of Chalmsbury. From Brocklestone and the coast, twenty miles further on, the cars of holiday-makers were returning in a steady stream. Through the approaching windscreens could be caught glimpses of angry men clad in vests and women half-turned in their seats to shout at tired, tear-streaked children. One, Purbright noticed, had commandeered and was wielding in the interests of discipline her infant's wooden seaside spade.

The Century Service Station had a twin forecourt on each side of the road. A queue of a dozen or so cars had formed at the pumps opposite, but the nearside station was doing no business. In a glass cabin an old man sat reading a page of newspaper. When he saw Purbright's car draw up, he folded the page very small and slipped it under a mug of tea. He went outside and stood by the nearest pump. "Which one, mester?"

On hearing that information and not petrol was being sought, the old man looked relieved. He ushered both visitors into his cabin. "The smell gets on your stomach. This weather 'specially." Asked, he said his name was Walker, Tom Walker.

"Are you on all night, Mr Walker?" Purbright inquired.

Aye, he was. Five nights a week. Until seven in the morning.

Was he here last Thursday night? Thursday?—yes, that's right, he was.

And had he, that night, served this gentleman in the photo? Indeed he had. The one with a car like a colander. Gordamitey, he needed his own private oil well, that fellow.

"Funny you should ask about him," added Mr Walker.

"Oh?" Purbright let him wonder it out. The old man helped his thought processes by pulling the end of his nose and twisting it, like a dial that needed delicate adjustment. But "No," he said at last. "It's no good."

"You mean, you think you know this man?" prompted Bradley.

"Not to say *know* him. But that face. I reckon I ought to be able to place it."

They asked him other questions.

"What time did you serve him, do you remember?"

"Not real late. Ten-ish, p'raps. Or a bit after."

"Was there anything unusual about him? Any marks? Did he seem to be trying to hide anything?"

"I think he'd cut his hand."

"His hand?" Purbright was frowning.

"I thought there was some blood on it. And there was a cloth beside him, on the seat."

"Bloodstained?"

"Aye, I reckon it was. Just a bit."

"Did he have anything to say, Mr Walker?" asked Bradley.

The old man considered. He was fondling the ear of a little grey cat that lay on a shelf beside him, its tail drooping perilously dose to the tea in Mr Walker's mug.

"No, not really," decided Mr Walker. The cat half-opened an eye and subjected Purbright to slow, supercilious appraisal. Mr Walker remembered something. "Hang on, though—he did ask me the way somewhere—he asked the way to Mill Lane."

They thanked the old man, stroked his cat, and left.

"Your Mr O'Dwyer may not have spent very long in this part of the world, but he certainly packed in a lot of social calls," Purbright said to Bradley, as they drove off.

"His friends on the Finchley Road will be impressed when they hear. Dear me—a shoot with the landed gentry—hobnobbing with consultants..."

"But not," Purbright observed quickly, "in that order, you'll notice. Why, when he'd finished knocking respect into old Crutchy Anderson, did he come chasing after Dr Gule, of all people?"

"We don't know that he did."

"He didn't come all this way just to find an all-night garage. Anyway, Mill Lane would be too much of a coincidence: there aren't above six houses from one end to the other."

"You remember that when we talked to Anderson, he mentioned having told Frankie of Arnold's connection with the Moldham family?"

Purbright smiled. "The harristocrofats, yes. Just before he passed out."

"He made it sound as if the information had been forced out of him. Yet Frankie considered it less important, less urgent, than something he'd learned about Dr Gule. Or so it would seem."

Purbright agreed.

"Why, then," Bradley asked, "did that otherwise talkative old sailorman not tell us what it was?"

"Fear of O'Dwyer?"

"I doubt it. Frankie was a man who didn't linger or return once he'd got what he wanted. And Anderson, I should say, is the sort of old rogue who would be able to size him up pretty quickly. It's somebody else he's frightened of."

They had reached a part of Chalmsbury set well back behind the main road and served by a narrow lane shaded by huge chestnut trees, where a speculative builder had, in the 1960s, created "for the more discriminating home owner" his Villas in the Dell, a scattering of

extortionately priced single-storey dwellings that an unimpressed council insisted on defining merely as one-to-seven Mill Lane.

"As a reward for your percipience," Purbright said to Bradley, as the car turned into the broad gateway of "Sylvanus", or number six, "I'll let you have first bite at the gentleman who kept us waiting so long."

Chapter Fourteen

The house was built on an irregularly-shaped plot of land in such a way that most of what was to spare lay between the front of the house and its flanking double garage. The area was paved but a flagstone had been left out here and there to allow rose bushes to be planted. These now were overgrown and straggled across the concrete like brambles.

A big blue saloon was in the garage, one door of which was still open. Part of the car's rear bodywork was buckled, an old wound, scabbed with rust.

Purbright took his time walking to the front door. He seemed interested in the flagstones.

Bradley strolled alongside. They approached the big semi-circular arch of dressed stone that served as entrance porch. In its shelter, Purbright pointed back to the patch of oil-soaked concrete he had spotted near one of the bushes. It was a foot across and gleamed thickly in the evening sun.

"He was here for some time, by the look of it," Purbright said.

There was no audible response to his pressing the bell button. It seemed not to be working. He tapped sharply with a coin. Almost at once, the door opened.

The girl standing there was young. She was pretty, but looked tired. From beneath the long skirt, made of a russet curtain-like material, peeped bare feet. She had enamelled her toe-nails green; the feet, though, were childishly grubby.

"Yer?"

"My colleague and I," Bradley began, "should be much obliged if..."

"Yer wot?"

For a moment Purbright was beset by the notion that the poor girl's difficulty in enunciation, together with the seemingly involuntary nodding and shaking of her head and shoulders, were indicative of some palsy-like illness. Then he realized that they were associated in fact with the sound he could hear somewhere inside the

house of a radio or record player. He withheld the nudge whereby he was about to warn Bradley not to be unkind to a sick girl.

Bradley tried again, in firmer tones.

"We are police officers and we wish to see Dr Gule. At once. Please tell him so."

"Wossy dunthen?"

Bradley preserved a stern silence. After a while, the girl shrugged and called back into the house.

"Hey, Dey-do, s'few."

She waited, half-turned in the doorway, looking upward with her mouth a little open. Into the vacancy of her expression crept a slow smile. "Scuppla dix," she called, then listened again. She winked mischievously at Purbright before calling once more. "C'mon, s'few. S'fline squod."

Beyond the girl, Bradley discerned movement. He stepped forward and stood by her side. "Dr Gule, may we come in? I believe you know who we are."

Without looking at her, Gule took the girl by the wrist and thrust her aside. She stuck out her tongue and ambled away contentedly in the direction of the musical pulsations.

Gule was not wearing his diagnostic half-moons but nevertheless regarded the callers by habit from beneath lowered brows.

"You say you are policemen?"

"We confidently assert it," replied Bradley.

For several seconds Dr Gule continued to scrutinize his visitors as if hopeful of decrying symptoms of imminent mortification. Purbright gazed back, not defiantly, but with mild curiosity at the patches of hair which survived the doctor's otherwise fastidious razoring of his grave, slightly eunuch-like face; they grew upon cheekbones and adam's apple and resembled little rolls of wire.

"You must realize," said Gule, "that this is my private residence and not an out-patients' department. Could you not have called at the hospital?"

Bradley looked politely interested. "Which hospital would that be, doctor?"

"Flaxborough General. I was there earlier this evening. I would have had no objection to making myself available, had you asked in a proper manner."

Bradley, watched by the admiring Purbright, leaned forward and gave Gule's upper arm a friendly squeeze. "Don't reproach yourself, doctor. What matters is that you are available now. Shall we go inside?" And he stepped through the doorway, ushering Gule into his own house.

Purbright followed. They were in a lobby which, though spacious,

did not quite allow that distancing of parties essential to the proper display of indignation. Dr Gule nevertheless made no move towards accommodation more suitable for that purpose. He remained standing —tight-lipped and uncertain beside a table bearing a telephone, a litter of magazines and a brassière.

Bradley glanced about him. There were three doors, one ajar, revealing a lavatory; also an arched opening through which the girl had retreated. Music pulsed out of it like a chain of muffled explosions.

"What exactly is it you want?" Dr Gule inquired. "I have an appointment very shortly."

"I beg your pardon?" Bradley was cupping a hand to his ear.

The doctor swung about and marched out of the lobby. A moment or two later the sudden muting of the sounds within was followed by a nasal wail of objection. Gule reappeared, pale with annoyance.

"Yes?" His look suggested that they had been waiting to try and sell him an home pharmacopoeia.

"Look, sir," said Purbright, "don't you think it would be better if we went inside and sat down comfortably to talk?"

"No, I don't. I have an important appointment in a matter of a few minutes."

Bradley lit an understanding smile. "Come now, doctor: Inspector Purbright and I are used to a little untidiness. You should see some of the homes I've had to visit off the Caledonian Road."

Dr Gule looked at Purbright. "What is your chief constable's telephone number?

"His home number is ex-directory, sir."

"No doubt. You know it, though, surely?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well?"

"If you wish to speak to Mr Chubb, I could ask the station if he is available and willing to receive the call on his extension line."

"Do that."

Purbright crossed to the telephone and disinterred it from the pile of magazines. He dialled, then dangled the bra from one finger, and held it out towards Gule in an absent-minded offer of custodianship, which the doctor pointedly ignored. After a while Bradley relieved Purbright of the brassière and, at the moment of the doctor's reaching to accept the phone, draped it reverently over his forearm.

Purbright's helpfulness was not uninspired by his knowledge that Mr Chubb would, at this time of day, almost certainly be engaged either in tending his greenhouse cultures or in grooming his Yorkshire terriers: both tasks of pre-eminent importance to him. He therefore was not surprised by the difficulty the consultant appeared to

experience in making his identity known and appreciated; nor by the early termination—obviously on the initiative of the chief constable—of the ensuing exchange.

When, trembling and white-faced, Dr Gule put down the receiver, Purbright addressed him firmly and with seriousness.

"Let us waste no further time, doctor. We are investigating what may be murder. It is in your own interest as well as ours that you answer our questions as fully and clearly as you can. If you wish me to emphasize that point, I shall have to tell you—and this is no more and no less than the truth—that you, as far as the evidence goes at the moment, were the last person to see the victim alive."

"Victim? What victim?" The repetition of the word was made quietly, without bluster, as though Gule found puzzling the use by Purbright of so melodramatic a term.

Bradley answered. His attitude, too, was now more grave. "The man's name is O'Dwyer. A Londoner."

"Why should you suppose I might know anything about such a man? O'Dwyer... Who is he—a patient?"

"I doubt it, sir," said Purbright. "But he did call to see you. Here. Late on Thursday night."

Gule's implacably cold expression did not change, but there was a distinct pause before he spoke again.

"And from what source did you obtain that piece of information?"

"Would you mind telling me why Mr O'Dwyer came to see you on Thursday night, sir?"

The doctor stared defiantly at Purbright for some seconds longer, then half turned aside, shrugging.

"Someone did call here, yes. Fellow in his forties. An unpleasant and obstreperous man whose name I do not know and have no desire to know. From the fact that..."

"Such a man?" Bradley was holding up by one corner the photograph of O'Dwyer.

Gule glowered at it. "Yes. Obvious psychopath. I gathered afterwards that he'd been causing trouble at the Close. He put his hand through a glass door, apparently."

"He was injured?"

"One hand was wrapped up. It had bled. I assumed that there had been an accident nearby and that some fool had sent the wretched man round to me. Consultants might as well be plumbers as far as some people are concerned."

"You did admit this man, though," said Bradley.

"He pushed his way in," Gule amended. The tone implied that psychopaths and police inspectors had certain traits in common.

"Without explanation?"

"Without any coherent explanation. He raved and made threats. I thought he was drunk."

"What was the nature of his threats, sir?" Purbright asked.

"I have no idea."

"You mean you have forgotten them, doctor?"

"I mean that I paid no attention to them. They simply did not register."

"You thought the man was drunk," said Bradley, helpfully.

"I did, yes—as I have said already."

"And ever since," pursued Bradley, with no less solicitude, "you have been anxious."

"Anxious? Anxious about what?"

"A motor car was driven away that night by a man you assumed to be drunk. You are a public-spirited citizen. You cannot have been indifferent to the possible consequences."

Dr Gule looked at his watch. "I have had more important things to think about."

Bradley considered, then nodded. "Which would explain why you did not report to the police that a drunken stranger who had forced his way into your house and threatened you was now at large on the public highway in charge of a motor car."

Gule by now was looking extremely angry. "If you have finished with the insinuations, inspector..." He made as if to open the front door. The move had no effect on Bradley. He made another of his bland announcements.

"We are pleased to bring you reassurance, doctor. Mr O'Dwyer was not intoxicated when he intruded upon your hospitality. My colleague"—with a slightly courtly gesture he indicated Purbright—"will confirm that the post-mortem showed his system at death to have been absolutely innocent of alcohol."

"You don't know when he died," retorted Gule.

Purbright regarded him sharply. "Do *you*, sir?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Do you own a shotgun, sir?"

"Why? Am I supposed to have used one on the fellow?"

"I am only asking you if you own a gun, doctor. You will be able to attend your appointment much more promptly if you simply answer these questions. You are not the only person to whom they are being put, I assure you."

Gule, a little mollified, conceded that he did own a gun. As they would know if they consulted their licence list. And yes, he did shoot occasionally. Where?—here and there. Moldham?—no, not at Moldham. Did he know Colonel Moldham?—only in connection with hospital administration.

Once Dr Gule had surrendered himself, so to speak, to the disagreeable formalities of inquisition, the encounter lost much of the entertainment engendered by mutual bloody-mindedness. He continued stolidly to disclaim knowledge of O'Dwyer's identity or aims; and to parry every question concerning the late Mr Arnold with a reference to medical ethics. His answers were beginning to sound wearily disdainful like those of an ambassador defending his diplomatic bag against the importunities of a couple of native policemen.

At the end of quarter of an hour or so the two natives departed, but not before one of them—it was Bradley—observed with a ghastly jolly copper condescension that their going would doubtless be appreciated by Mrs Gule, who henceforth would "be able to have her music on again".

Purbright stopped the car at the first telephone kiosk and rang Fen Street. After giving Love instructions, he put a call through to the superintendent of Twilight Close.

Mr Wellbeloved, ravished from enjoyment of a programme of hymn singing on television, was not in charitable mood. This somehow made it easier for Purbright to tell him, without equivocation, that a police surgeon, accompanied by an officer, was on his way to examine one of his, Mr Wellbeloved's, charges, and that under no circumstances was the man in question to be given any medication in the meantime.

Rejoining Bradley in the car, Purbright shook his head. "There is," he said, "a terrible deal of righteous indignation around at the moment. I am beginning to feel like Admiral Byng."

"You can always put the blame on me," suggested Bradley. "I am manifestly uncouth and provocative."

"What did you think of Dr Gule?"

Bradley smiled to himself. "An inordinately vain fellow, certainly. But anxious. Personally disorganized. Probably unhappy. Has he a drink record?"

"He would have had, I think, but for a blind eye or two in the right quarter."

"A womanizer?"

"Reputedly. His patients don't mind; they seem to regard that sort of thing as conferring *cachet*."

"Odd, isn't it," said Bradley, "that a drunken and disreputable physician has only to avoid actually killing somebody to acquire a popular reputation for outstanding professional brilliance."

"Doctors inspire quite different attitudes from those we adopt towards other kinds of specialist," Purbright suggested. "We aren't filled with gratitude and admiration for a service engineer just

because the washing machine he's mended fails to electrocute us."

"No, our expectations of the more mundane tradesmen are paradoxically higher. If Gule were a plumber, he'd be out of business in a fortnight. One does not wish one's tap water to be renewed by a libertine."

"If Gule were a plumber," said Purbright, "I fancy he would be in trouble over the plumber's mate. I much doubt if that girl is yet sixteen."

"In that case, she has a precocious taste in jewellery."

"The necklace thing?" Purbright was frowning, as if at some missed point.

"Those were no worry beads," said Bradley, "unless we're talking about the worry of paying for them."

"Expensive?"

Bradley did not reply at once. Purbright glanced at him and saw that he was smiling. He looked again at the road ahead and said: "Oh, dear."

"Never mind; we couldn't have done much about it. Not on the spur of the moment."

Purbright was not consoled. "He'll get rid of the damn thing."

"Only if he panics," said Bradley. "Disposing of it would force him into a blank denial of something that he must know very well would then be construed as a motive for killing O'Dwyer. Anyway, the girl won't let him. She isn't living with Gule for the sake of his bedside manners."

Purbright's "They're not emeralds, are they?" sounded like a not very hopeful plea to be spared the worst.

"Oh, no," Bradley assured him. "Not emeralds."

"As a matter of fact, I thought they looked rather too gaudy to be valuable—especially as they'd been strung together in that rather home-made way."

"The girl probably did that. The original setting will have been unpinned and broken up."

"In order," said Purbright, gloomily, "to make it easier to hide the bits in a plaster cast called 'At the End of Life's Lane'."

"What a nice name for a pension fund."

The road now was taking a wide sweep through parkland bordered by giant chestnut trees. The low evening sun gilded their branches and picked out in shadow the grassed-over ribs of ancient strip farming.

"Some of the Moldham acres," Purbright remarked.

"They smell very pleasant." Bradley had wound down the window and was sniffing the scents of roadside meadowsweet and cow parsley mixed with the breeze-borne redolence of a distant field

of bean flowers.

"Perhaps our odour will be more acceptable at the Hall when we bear tidings of rediscovered family treasure."

"Treasure?" Bradley looked dubious. "Hardly. Nice stones, quite richly set, but we're talking in terms of some hundreds perhaps—certainly not thousands." He paused, as Purbright thought, uncomfortably, then said: "You mustn't mind this odious knowledgeability. I belonged for a while to what journals of the lower sort like to term the Sparklers Squad."

"Ah, so you're not so ignorant—which I am—as to suppose anything green and shining to be an emerald."

"No, green glass is always my first bet. But Arnold's hoard—if that is what the girl is wearing—looks to me like Russian chrysoberyl. Did you notice the green colour change to purple when she went out of the hall into a passage under artificial light?"

Purbright took his attention from the road long enough to give Bradley a sidelong stare of admiration.

"Alexandrite, they call it," added Bradley effortlessly. "Found in the Urals and Ceylon."

"Dr Thorndyke," murmured Purbright, "rides again."

Chapter Fifteen

When the two inspectors arrived at the little infirmary in Twilight Close, they found Sergeant Love standing in a sentry-like attitude outside the door.

"He's being examined now," said Love, making an indicative movement of his head. "I couldn't get Reynolds," he added, cheerfully.

"Police surgeon," explained Purbright in an aside to Bradley. "Why was that?" he asked Love.

"His wife said he wasn't in, but that was only after I explained what we wanted him for. I think he just didn't want to come out on this particular job."

Purbright spoke again to Bradley. "I was afraid this might happen. The local GPs will do anything rather than run foul of a consultant."

Love looked pleased with himself. "Dr Rambanajee didn't mind. He came straight away."

Purbright drew a quick breath. He waited a moment before saying: "Ah, well, that's all right, then."

"He *is* on the list of deputies," pointed out Love, suddenly apprehensive.

"Yes, of course. You've done very well, Sid."

Bradley had been listening. He gave Purbright a questioning glance. "Incompetent?"

"Far from it. Absolutely reliable. Gule would enjoy trepanning him without anaesthetic."

After about ten minutes the door opened and the little nurse peeped round it daintily. She beckoned.

Cratchy Anderson was sitting up in bed. He leered sleepily at the approaching policemen and raised in greeting a hand like a piece of driftwood.

Beside him, Dr Rambanajee folded the inflatable cuff of his sphygmomanometer, shut the lid of the instrument and packed it with precision in his case. He looked up as Purbright walked to the bed and declared jocularly: "He will live a while yet, this fellow."

The head of Dr Rambanajee consisted of three circles: the face itself, gleaming brown and expressive of reflective amusement; and the big, exactly round lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"It was kind of you to come at such short notice, doctor," said Purbright.

The circles inclined forward gracefully.

"I explained," put in Sergeant Love, "that Mr Anderson had made a request for a second opinion."

The sailorman's grin broadened in confirmation. He groped beneath the bedclothes and brought forth a bottle of Guinness. He looked about him uncertainly, then raised the bottle to his mouth.

Love, sharing the horror of the general impression that the old man was about to bite the neck off, snatched the bottle away and drew from his own pocket a pen-knife whose many supplementary devices included a corkscrew and a bottle opener.

"I will write for Mr Anderson a report which he may care to show you," said Dr Rambanajee to Purbright. "For the moment, it may be of sufficient interest to you to know that he is, clinically speaking, in good health. He exhibits no symptoms that would indicate need for medication of any kind. Certainly, nothing in his condition would warrant sedation on any substantial scale."

Bradley had been watching Anderson's fumbling but happy progress with his Guinness. "He's very sleepy," he said to Dr Rambanajee.

"So should I be if I had swallowed eighty milligrams of Lotusol in the last twenty-four hours. He will brighten as time goes on."

With which assurance, Dr Rambanajee bowed to the company and made his way primly out of the room.

Mr Wellbeloved, glum with Ancient and Modern, watched from the superintendent's lodge the departure of the doctor's car and

mentally pictured the reaction of Dr Gule to what had been going on. *Who*, he would demand, *let that little dervish on to my bloody ward?* For was it not Dr Rambanajee, alone of all the medical men in Flaxborough, who had happened to be available to take a sample of the consultant's blood that night when he had been found driving an ambulance round and round the Market Place after the Hospital Ball? Gule had been saved from prosecution only by simulating a heart attack long enough for colleagues in the intensive care unit to set about oxidizing his gin intake with a respiratory support machine.

It seemed to Purbright that Anderson would be of questionable use as an informant until the residue of drug had been eliminated from his system. On the other hand, his natural cunning—now at a fortuitously low level—would increase with returning alertness. He sought Bradley's advice.

"It would be charitable," said his colleague, "to let the poor old chap sleep until he fully regains his faculties. He will, by then, be able to lie easily in both senses of the word. I suggest that charity be postponed."

Love was sent off to help the nurse make some strong coffee. Purbright, without pressing the matter to sadistic degree, coaxed the old sailorman to let his Guinness first be held for him and then put aside. ("A bit too soporific," Bradley had tipped, from knowledge of low life.) When the coffee arrived, they gave Mr Anderson a huge mug of it and pledged him merrily in their own plastic beakers.

"Down the hatch, mateys all!" cried Crutchy, aglow with realization of a suddenly acquired importance.

He swilled nearly half his coffee in one go into a gullet long since kippered to insensitivity by grog and tobacco juice.

"Aahh..." He slowly drew the back of his hand across his mouth. In the quiet of the ward, it sounded like surf on a pebbly beach.

Purbright gave what he intended to be a comradely wink. "Not a bad little berth, Crutchy." He glanced around commendingly.

The old man considered the proposition. "Ar, not bad," he conceded, then pointed to his eye. "Not if you keep one of these open all the time."

"Which you do."

Anderson chuckled, and tugged a leathery ear. "One of these an' all, skipper. All the time."

Purbright conveyed by an expression of surprise and keen interest that he would like to hear more about the vigilance of Mr Anderson and about the circumstances that compelled it.

The sailorman leaned forward from his pile of pillow, looked about him, and announced with croaky confidentiality: "They'd have scuppered me, if they could."

"No! Who would?"

Mr Anderson savoured with great satisfaction the shock on the faces of his audience. He stroked the side of his long, tar-stained nose and looked upon each in turn. Having selected Bradley to receive his next revelation, he beckoned him and said: "They think they've made me fast here. Think I can't cast off. That's what they think. Gilly Gully and old Kiss-me-quick."

"Really?" responded Bradley. "More fool them, I should say."

Mr Anderson glared while considering if this reply were as friendly as it seemed. Then he nodded, and grasped Bradley's arm.

"I'm going to show you something. Just take a look over the side there."

Bradley peered obligingly at the floor in the direction indicated. So did Purbright and Love.

"The locker, matey," whispered Crutchy. "Go on, broach it. It ain't locked."

Bradley pulled at the door of the bedside locker. It opened easily. He glanced up at Anderson for further instruction.

A skeletal finger pointed to a newspaper-wrapped parcel of curious shape that had been stuffed diagonally into the lower compartment of the cupboard.

"Unship it, matey," the old man invited.

Bradley drew out the parcel and held it on his lap. Anderson signalled that he might take off the wrapping.

Awkwardly, Bradley removed the first of several sheets of the *News of the World*. The headline, *I stripped for Katie Selassie*, leered incongruously from the parcel's broader end.

Soon there was a pile of newsprint on the bed. As Bradley untucked the final sheet, Anderson glanced anxiously at the door and then—with something like pride—gazed upon the emerging object.

It was a wooden leg.

Bradley and Purbright immediately expressed admiration. The sergeant actually patted the deputy limb and remarked upon its robust construction.

"It's been round the Horn a time or two, has that," declared Mr Anderson, with forgiveable licence. (He actually had lost his leg by dipping it, while drunk, in a shrimp copper off Flaxborough haven.)

Bradley offered his contribution to the general good feeling and mutual confidence. He grinned at Crutchy. "So you're not beached, after all, shipmate, whatever old Gilly Gully thinks."

A momentary cloud of suspicion passed over Anderson's face. Purbright prayed that his colleague's dive into maritime metaphor had not done too much damage. He handed the old man his Guinness back.

"Cheers, shipmates!" declared Crutchy, once more as warmly disposed as if they were forecastle mutineers who had set wicked Captain Kiss-me-quick Wellbeloved adrift in the longboat.

He nudged Purbright and spoke close.

"They think they've done me out of Whippy's things. Did you know that, skip?"

"I didn't, no. How's that, then?"

"You knew he was no sooner in harbour than sold up, didn't you? Every stitch and spar. In the saleroom. You knew that?"

"Aye, I knew that."

The old man cleared his throat. It sounded more as if he were cutting it. "Pretended all his gear belonged to the council, on account of him not being spliced. That's what they said. So a lawyer took it away and put it up and we never saw it no more. What do you think of that? The pitcher an' all—took *that* away to the sale. Proud o' that pitcher, was Whippy. Aye, b'God he was, poor old sod."

As if by mutual consent, there ensued a moment's silence in memory of the late artist.

Then Anderson slowly compressed one of his black, cavernous eyes into a terrible wink.

He took from Bradley—to the evident relief of the London inspector—the wooden leg he had been nursing, and set it before him on the bed.

"Now, then," he said, "what d'you reckon we've got on deck now, eh?"

The old man looked at each of his audience in turn, then took firm hold of the narrow cylindrical part of the leg in both hands. He applied a twisting pressure. The leg emitted a succession of thin squeals at first, then, as the unscrewing of its constituents became easier and more rapid, accepted partition in silence.

From the disclosed cavity, Anderson drew a narrow roll of paper. Released, it partly unfurled. He smoothed it flat on the bedclothes.

"Know what this 'ere is?"

They shook their heads, unwilling to detract from the long pleasure of his apocalypse.

"That's Whippy Arnold's will, that is. His last will and testimonal. And it's down here—all signed and witnessed proper and on the line that Whippy's cargo comes to me. His pitcher, his ornument, his chopper, his golf things and his grog glasses. Ar, an' another thing..."—the old man pointed to a small piece of paper, pinned to the larger document—"See what that is?"

Purbright bent forward and scrutinized the appended paper. It was a receipt for thirty-two pence, paid by Mr F. Arnold for "materials, cottage picture", to the Social Services Department. The

form, which appeared to have been torn off a pad, was signed and dated February 4, 1977.

"If we wants to keep what we makes in the workship, we has to pay," explained Mr Anderson. "We gets one of these tickets from Mrs Besker."

"Mrs Besker?"

"She's Theruppy."

"I see." Purbright turned to Bradley and said softly: "So much for the council's appropriation of the Arnold masterpiece. It looks as if they owe the old boy four hundred quid."

Though the aside could not have reached him, the old boy looked on with an expression of gleeful approbation.

Bradley spoke to him.

"Tell me, Mr Anderson: why was it, when you had this proof of Mr Arnold's having made over his property to you, that you let the authorities take the stuff off to an auction sale?"

The sailorman rubbed his chin and regarded Bradley out of the corner of his eye. "You tell me, mester," he suggested.

Bradley pretended to think hard. "No good," he said at last. "I can't."

"Nor can I," added Purbright. He tugged the sleeve of Sergeant Love, who had been trying to get a tune out of the hollow leg shank by blowing across the hole. Love at once put it down.

"Hark, then," said Anderson to the company at large. "Ain't no sense in raising sail when some other bugger's ready to take you in tow, right?"

"Right," said Purbright.

The old man nodded. "Well, then." He gave no sign of providing a key to his parable.

Purbright waited a moment, then said: "You mean you would have put the things into a sale yourself if the council hadn't done so?"

Anderson smirked sapiently. "Pitchers ain't my line, skip. Nor's ornuments. An' I ain't likely to risk putting me old peg there into a golfing 'ole, am I?"

For a moment Purbright debated within himself whether he should risk losing the quarry by offering a more blatant bait. There was all the time in the world. He decided to take a chance.

"Fetched a lot of money, I believe," he said, as casually as he could.

The old man wrinkled his nose. "Thought it would."

Bradley, sensing that a point of delicate balance had been reached, kept quiet. He stared at Love with bland commiseration, like a fellow traveller in a very slow lift.

"What, fetch a lot?" probed Purbright, a fraction less casually.

"Aye." A few seconds passed. "Lot of interest in that pitcher."

"A large *number* of people interested, you mean?"

The lean old cheeks puffed rebuttal. "Didn't need to be. Not if the right ones was there."

"Ah," said Purbright. He winked. "And I should think you had a fair idea of who the right ones were."

Anderson grinned and made a rapid chewing motion. Bradley, fearful of impending expectoration, drew back a little, but the chewing proved only to be the prelude to a further confidence.

"Wrote to 'em."

Purbright raised his brows. "Ah, of course—the gentleman in London." He made no mention of the gentleman's present condition.

"Aye, 'im," said Anderson, somewhat sourly.

"And...?"

There was a pause. Purbright waited for the outcome of a struggle between the old man's wiliness and his desire for attention. Discretion lost.

"Wrote to 'er an' all." A leer. "That one was nonnymus, though."

"Naturally," said Purbright. He considered. "I suppose you know it was she who bid highest?"

The leer broadened.

"Stands to reason, don't it?"

Bradley broke the silence. "That London gentleman," he said, "was very disappointed that he didn't get your friend's picture."

A short, rasping laugh from the old sailorman.

"Why," Bradley asked, "did you send him off that night to call on Dr Gule?"

This time the amusement of Mr Anderson was so extreme that deep drowsiness soon supervened. Slowly he sank into the bank of pillow, eyes shut and mouth open. Purbright called the nurse.

"The sergeant," he explained, "will be staying here until we can arrange for another officer to keep Mr Anderson company. The doctor thinks Mr Anderson will be fit to go back to his own room tomorrow."

The girl seemed a little hesitant. "The new instructions," she said, "are that he's to have no more sedation."

"Yes, that's right."

The nurse nodded and gave the inspectors a little smile as they prepared to leave. She looked, Purbright thought, much happier than when they had arrived.

Chapter Sixteen

The impounded legacy of Crunchy Anderson was set out on the desk in Purbright's office. It was Tuesday morning. Purbright and Bradley sat staring at the two hacked golf balls, the railway dining-car tumbler, the floral soap dish, the meat mincer and the Cottage at the End of Life's Lane.

The decanter stoppers had been eliminated from the inquiry; it having been ascertained that a dealer—the Miss Teatime who had been for a while in the bidding for lot thirty-four—had inadvertently replaced them in the wrong tray during view day, thus rendering the parent decanters (which early in the sale happened to be knocked down to her without much opposition) stopperless and hence remarkably cheap.

The mincer could now be regarded in proper perspective, thanks to the inquisitiveness of Sergeant Love. He had learned from one of the older residents of Twilight Close that this useful machine had been harboured by Whippy for neither sentimental nor speculative reason but simply as an auxiliary to dentures that he contemptuously termed his "parish choppers".

There was a third person in the office. Sergeant Malley was seated near the window. On a small table before him lay an old leather-bound newspaper file, open. Slowly and with much interest Malley reviewed its columns. However carefully he separated and turned the tall, yellowed pages, dust drifted up from them. Every few minutes he snorted gently or rubbed his nose on the shiny blue serge of his sleeve.

Purbright looked across. "How are the researches, Bill?"

Malley grunted. "You'd never believe how many flower shows there were in 1921."

"Well, there were flowers to be shown in those days."

"Are you sure we've got the right year? I shouldn't care to carry many of these back and forth to the *Citizen* office."

"Mr Chubb is the authority, not me. He said it was the year his father came back from India."

Bradley made a suggestion. "Might it save time to concentrate first on the births and deaths column? There's usually the local equivalent of a sort of court circular."

Malley raised a finger in acknowledgement of the guest's good sense and began turning pages more swiftly.

In less than five minutes an exclamation rose from the archives.

"Here we are. Coming of Age. May 27. Moldham, Veronica Mary."

Purbright and Bradley came to stand by Malley's shoulder. He searched the next five pages of the same issue, then turned to the sixth.

The *Flaxborough Citizen* certainly had done justice to the occasion. The story extended over three columns, nearly a whole one of which carried the names of everyone present. And there were five pictures.

The deep bank of headlines was nothing if not explicit.

MISS VERONICA MARY MOLDHAM ATTAINS MAJORITY
INTERESTING EVENT NEAR FLAXBOROUGH
CELEBRATION BY WELL-KNOWN LOCAL FAMILY
VILLAGERS PAY RESPECTS TO DAUGHTER OF POPULAR SQUIRE
PERSONALITIES OF FARM AND FIELD "CAPTURED" THROUGH OUR LENS!

The photographs, though faded, were sharply enough in focus and had been so faithfully rendered by the old flat-bed press that every face was identifiable.

Veronica appeared in three of the pictures. At that age she was a dark-eyed brunette whose assumption of the then-fashionable shoulder droop and breastlessness was more than offset by alert, sensually speculative eyes and voluptuous mouth.

"Bit of a thruster in those days," Purbright remarked airily to Bradley, who said he wouldn't be surprised.

The first picture showed the girl standing by a horse in the company of a young man wearing a blazer and a friendly, if decidedly inane smile.

"Who's the Wodehouse character?" inquired Bradley.

The caption was consulted. "Of course; it's her brother," exclaimed Malley. "Old Moldy. Good Lord." He stared at the picture a moment longer in silence and shook his head.

In another photograph, Veronica was seated in an open carriage with the foolish-looking young man and an elderly couple. She held a parasol and appeared to be finding the occasion something of a lark. Her parents clearly did not. They gazed sideways at the camera with the solemn regality of a pair of Romanovs.

"That, I suppose, is Whippy Arnold." Purbright pointed to the coachman. They saw a man in his early twenties, wearing livery that included a top hat, set very squarely on his small, neat-looking head. His face, half turned towards the camera, had a sharp handsomeness. He wore sideboards, black and razored very straight, almost down to the angle of his jaw.

"Calculating eyes," remarked Bradley.

"It's a daddy of a whip he's got." The object of Malley's admiration was a splendid curly affair, long enough for a team of six.

It was to the third picture in which Veronica appeared that Purbright paid closest attention. She was in a long evening gown and

had been posed alone, inside the house, holding a champagne glass and a rigid smile. The photograph was headed: A TOAST TO THE FUTURE.

Its caption read: "*Caught" in merry mood by our Photographer, Miss Veronica Mary Moldham was attired for dancing in the evening at Moldham Hall in this charming eau-de-Nil gown. The beautiful "collar" necklace of matched Russian emeralds was Miss Moldham's twenty-first birthday gift from her parents, Major General Archibald Bruce Pordack Moldham, DSO, CBE, JP, and Mrs Moldham; and was supplied by Messrs Vacci and Benn, of London*.

Purbright indicated the caption to Bradley. "They obviously thought they were emeralds in 1921. The local paper did, anyway."

"And who," asked Bradley, "were the Moldhams to correct so flattering an error?"

He looked carefully at the photograph. "One can't swear to it, but I'd be willing to bet these now adorn the neck of Dr Gule's young concubine."

"Housekeeper," Purbright corrected, gently. The large sergeant looked with mild amusement from one to the other and polished his pipe bowl against the side of his nose.

"What I cannot understand," said Purbright, "is how this piece of very nice but not wildly valuable jewellery comes to have its present significance. When Whippy pinched it—as it is reasonable to assume he did—he had the perfectly comprehensible if unworthy motive of winning an extra perk from his employers. When Mrs Moldham-Clegg learned that it had not disappeared for ever but was going to come up for sale, she had a good motive for trying to get it back—sentiment, family loyalty, that sort of thing. She might even be forgiven for paying over the odds.

"Again, I can conceive of an inept little London thief following a tip and coming up here to make an easy pound or two.

"But burglary? Assaulting the police? Murder? Surely not for a handful of semi-precious stones."

"Don't forget," said Bradley, "that they were considered worth purloining by an eminent consultant the moment he could safely get his hands on them."

Malley grinned. "What, so that he could give them to his tottie? Young Myra wouldn't know the difference between rubies and bicycle reflectors."

"It does seem rather odd behaviour on Gule's part," said Purbright, thoughtfully.

"Oh, he's not all that fussy," Malley said. "I don't mean he wouldn't pinch them on the spur of the moment—just that he wouldn't put himself out to please his girlfriend."

"How would he have known about Whippy's ill-gotten gains?"

asked Bradley.

"According to Anderson," said Purbright, "Gule spent an unusual amount of time with Whippy. Might he not have been pumping him, Bill?"

Malley blew doubtfully. "They reckon Gule knows how to do the old Svengali stuff if he wants. And Whippy wasn't as fly as he liked people to think. He was a boastful old sod at times."

Bradley picked up the plaster picture from Purbright's desk and regarded it in silence for several moments. He turned it over. "The coachman's nest egg," he murmured. A pause. "His security..."

Suddenly Bradley swung round. "If our old nautical friend knew himself to be the beneficiary under Arnold's will, why did he not make his claim immediately when Arnold died? Why, instead, did he write off to a London malefactor and a local lady bountiful, telling them about the sale of his own property?"

"The answer depends on whether Crutchy knew about the necklace," said Purbright. "If he did, he might have preferred to leave others to bid for stolen property rather than handle it himself. He'll doubtless get the money as soon as he produces the will."

"And if he didn't know?"

Purbright shook his head. "He must have known. And he must have known whose it was. Why else would he have written to her—as he all but admitted to us?"

"In what terms? Dear Mrs Moldham-thingummy, the necklace Whippy Arnold nicked off you is going to be sold by auction disguised as a picture, please tell your friends."

Malley chuckled, then looked thoughtful. "I don't reckon," he said slowly, "that Whippy did pinch the thing. If he had—and I know the Moldhams—they'd have chucked him out just on suspicion. The rest of the servants as well, probably. There were plenty to be got in those days."

"The pension," said Purbright, suddenly. "Not only did he survive in his job, but was still being paid by the family after he'd retired."

"That's certainly hard to believe," remarked the sergeant. He grinned and scratched the side of his jaw. "Old Moldy always said that *wages* were demoralizing, let alone pensions."

"One begins to get the impression that Mr Arnold did somebody a favour at some time," said Bradley. "A substantial favour, at that, and one whose value he knew. I think..." There was a pause. "I think that he was given that necklace. A sort of warranty, perhaps—or even as a down payment."

"It's an attractive idea, I suppose," Purbright began. Then he looked aside. There had been a quiet knock on the door, which now was opening,

“We are somewhat in need of attractive ideas at the moment, Mr Purbright.” Mr Chubb closed the door as considerately as he had opened it and walked towards the window. He paused to look down at the open file of the 1921 *Flaxborough Citizen* and to restrain with a gesture Sergeant Malley’s windy effort to rise from his too-small chair.

The photographs engaged Mr Chubb’s attention for nearly a minute. Then he looked intently and solemnly at Bradley.

“Very distressing, is it not, Mr Bradley, this business out at Moldham.”

Bradley was not sure how he was expected to reply; by his tone and aspect, the chief constable seemed to ascribe to his guest some measure of responsibility for what had happened. He said, simply: “Yes, very,” and left it at that.

Mr Chubb noticed the picture in Bradley’s hand. “Ah,” he said, more lightly, and glanced aside at Purbright, “the beginning of all our troubles, eh, Mr Purbright?” He held out his hand. “May I?”

Bradley relinquished the cottage, and the chief constable took it to the window. He viewed it closely in the light, held it at arm’s length, pouted, and declared: “Quite picturesque, really.”

Suddenly Bradley found himself being smiled at.

“And are *you* artistic, Mr Bradley?”

In such a manner might Mr Chubb have asked Oscar Wilde whether he supported the scouting movement.

Purbright intervened hastily.

“I suggest, sir, that Colonel Moldham be charged and taken into custody this afternoon. I believe his solicitor has already advised him to be ready to make himself available.”

Mr Chubb looked momentarily surprised. Then he frowned. To Malley he said: “Would you mind leaving us for a moment, sergeant?” Malley, totally unoffended, lumbered off.

“I suppose you are satisfied that no other interpretation can be placed on this affair?” the chief constable asked Purbright. “Bruce Moldham is not a man to evade responsibility once it is firmly established. He won’t run away, you know.”

“I’m sure that you’re right, sir,” replied Purbright. “On the other hand, the colonel has already made an admission that tallies with the post-mortem findings. It would be unfortunate if any undue delay in arresting the gentleman were to be construed by the defence as a sign of uncertainty.”

“Or of partiality,” threw in Bradley, with a perish-the-thought face, before Purbright could forestall him.

The chief constable gazed with icy concentration out of the window at the distant cupola of the municipal buildings. During the ensuing silence, Purbright sought a topic that might restore some

measure of mutual communion.

"There is another, less important, piece of unpleasantness, sir," he announced. "It isn't without relevance to the man's death at Moldham."

And he related the discovery of what promised to be Veronica Moldham-Clegg's long-lost necklace.

"Tell me if I read your suggestions aright," said Mr Chubb, when he had given the story thought. "Do I understand that Dr Gule tricked the actual thief while he was a patient in his care, and then gave the necklace to this girl with whom he appears to be cohabiting?"

"The evidence does point that way, sir. A little earlier today we found a technician in the orthopaedic department of the General who recalled Dr Gule's having asked him for a little plaster of Paris about three weeks ago."

The chief constable looked down at the picture, turned it over and rubbed his little finger on the uneven surface. "He'd want it to fill the hole he'd made in this, presumably."

"That might well have been his intention," Purbright said. Mr Chubb nodded sagely. He held the picture to his ear and shook it.

"Psychiatrist, isn't he—Gule?"

Purbright said that he was, knowing that Mr Chubb would be less inclined to discount the possibility of infamous conduct on the part of a practitioner in so outlandish a discipline, as distinct from those who rated the chief constable's description as "proper" doctors.

"Of course, it may well be," said Mr Chubb, "that our unfortunate friends at Moldham feel they have sufficient trouble to cope with as it is, without rushing about identifying jewellery. And unless it *is* identified, I cannot see that there would be any case for Gule to answer."

Bradley was looking very sympathetic. He first glanced deferentially at Chubb, then addressed Purbright.

"I do see the chief constable's point. If I explain it to my divisional chief, he may well agree to be accommodating."

"Accommodating, Mr Bradley? I do not quite take your meaning." Mr Chubb looked as if he would rather take hemlock.

Bradley gave the shrug of a reasonable man. "You see, sir, when my superintendent agreed to my giving you assistance—insignificant as it has proved—it was because the felonious Mr O'Dwyer was, in a sense, our responsibility. He was on parole. Therefore, I do owe my superintendent an explanation of O'Dwyer's having contrived to be murdered so far from home. His intention to steal jewels did seem a proper, as well as a demonstrable excuse. However, if you feel that a blind eye should be turned upon minor, even though relevant, misdeeds, in order to spare local people embarrassment..."

Purbright realized, with something akin to panic, that for the first time in his life he was witnessing Mr Chubb in a state of real anger. He looked on helplessly as the pale cheeks become mottled with dark red; and the silvery eyebrows, usually elegantly arched, began to lower and contract into tufts of bristle.

"Mr Bradley, I do not know and I do not very much care what is considered proper by policemen in London; but I assure you that there will be no turning of blind eyes in Flaxborough while I am its chief constable."

Having listened with grave attentiveness, his head a little on one side, Bradley allowed the statement to be rounded with a short silence. Then he nodded, gazed admiringly at the still transfigured features of Mr Chubb, and declared: "May I say that I count it a privilege to have known you, sir."

The chief constable offered no further comment. He stepped away from the window, tossed Whippy Arnold's painting on to Purbright's desk and left the office, silently closing the door behind him.

"Rather like Hamlet's father's ghost," suggested Bradley, with no sign of discomposure.

It was one of those moments when, had he still been a smoker, Purbright would have lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, scratched his chin, and said: "Mmm..." Deprived of such means of release, he sat at his desk and moved things around.

Bradley watched. "I say, you don't think I've..." He glanced at the closed door.

"No, no," Purbright said hastily, "he'll settle down."

Bradley looked satisfied. "Good. One tries to be diplomatic with the Chubbs of this world, but the effort does seem to be wasted sometimes."

Purbright did not hear him. He was examining, at first with mild annoyance, then with increasing absorption, part of the frame round the Cottage at the End of Life's Lane.

Whether by careless handling on the part of an unwontedly agitated chief constable, or as a result of its having been thrown brusquely on the desk, the plastic had split along what now appeared to be a glued seam.

Purbright pulled the seam further apart. Within the hollow frame was revealed something white. A roll of paper, about six inches long. It came out quite easily.

Bradley had noticed Purbright's preoccupation and was now standing beside him.

Purbright unrolled the paper and smoothed it flat. It was slightly yellowed and grubby, but the red print and the entries in spidery black ink were perfectly legible.

Not until they both had read every word of the writing did either speak.

"Well, well," said Purbright, softly.

"And who," added Bradley, "is going to tell the good news?"

Chapter Seventeen

The family solicitor was already in the drawing-room of Moldham Hall when Purbright and Bradley, accompanied by Sergeant Love, were ushered in by the colonel.

Mr Loughbury set down his sherry glass and rose to acknowledge the policemen with a nod and a single, grave "Morning". He helped to find them chairs, then resumed his own.

This overture was watched with an air of amused detachment by Mrs Moldham-Clegg, who sat very erect beside a window. The light, crossing her face at an angle, rendered it lined as an old map. She held some lemon-coloured crochet work on her lap and occasionally glanced down to add another loop. Idle hands had never been encouraged on the Moldhams' distaff side.

"I believe," Purbright began, "that you know why Inspector Bradley and I are here." He was looking at Colonel Moldham, who was sitting on the edge of the oval table. Moldham compressed his lips and examined the nail of one finger.

"The colonel is aware of your purpose, inspector," said Mr Loughbury. "I am here, of course, on his behalf, so if there are any questions you wish to put to him—or to Mrs Moldham-Clegg—I'm sure you will not object to my clients exercising the right to confer with me before replying."

"Not at all, sir," said Purbright. He glanced at Mrs Moldham-Clegg. "As a matter of fact, there are one or two points we should like to clear up first."

The solicitor gave a small but magnanimous bow.

"Did you, Mrs Moldham-Clegg, ever suffer the loss—by theft or any other cause—of a fairly valuable necklace, a small green necklace?"

Mr Loughbury looked with concern at the colonel's aunt. She frowned. "A *neck*lace?"

"Yes, ma'am. Or collar. Of something called Alexandrite."

She looked at Mr Loughbury. "He sounds quite a geologist." To Purbright she said: "I have no idea what Alexandrite is. And to the best of my recollection I have never lost any necklaces. Or collars," she added.

"The necklace in question was a twenty-first birthday present from your parents," Purbright persisted.

Again the solicitor looked at the old woman as if warning her to make careful reply, but she seemed not to notice him.

"Oh, *that*. Heavens, that was dim, dim ages ago. A girlhood trinket. Whatever do you want to know about that?"

"Do you still have the necklace?" Bradley asked.

"Of course not. Don't be tiresome."

Mr Loughbury intervened. "That would seem to dispose of the matter, inspector. My clients have been under some strain; do you think we could dispense with these comparatively trivial inquiries for the moment?"

"No, sir," said Purbright, flatly. "I should like to know if Mrs Moldham-Clegg's necklace was ever stolen and, if not, how it was disposed of."

The solicitor raised his hand before the old woman could reply. "I think," he said, "that my client should know the reason for your question before she answers."

"Very well, sir. We believe that a necklace which has come to light during our inquiries into Mr O'Dwyer's death originally belonged to Mrs Moldham-Clegg. It is important to know how it came to change hands. If it was stolen, the lady is entitled to recover it, naturally."

Rich Dick turned to Mrs Moldham-Clegg and raised his brows.

She looked critically at her crochet for a moment, and said: "Nothing, inspector, was ever stolen from anybody in this house. As for the necklace you are making such a fuss about, it was probably sent to a charity sale, or even given to one of the servants. I really cannot remember."

"To your coachman, perhaps?"

She gave a little one-sided smile. "Even to the coachman, yes. Although I find it hard to believe that he wore it himself."

Bradley smiled with the rest and had nothing but polite and kindly interest in his voice when he asked: "Might not such a gift have been in consideration of a favour on Mr Arnold's part?"

Before the solicitor could voice the indignation that was so dearly evidenced on his face, Mrs Moldham-Clegg remarked to Purbright: "Your colleague seems to have a certain vulgarity of approach. I'm sure that Mr Chubb would not much care for it."

Bradley looked smug, as if savouring a compliment.

"Can't we," appealed Rich Dick, "get to the main purpose of your presence here, Purbright? The colonel has been very patient."

Bruce Moldham was, in fact, looking not so much patient as sleepily indifferent. Love had no difficulty in surmising an appropriate cause: his mind already was organizing a search for the empty phial in

the bathroom and a call for an ambulance with stomach pump.

"Very well, sir," Purbright said. "I propose to put certain questions to the colonel. He must understand that he need not say anything unless he wishes, but that what he does say will be noted by the sergeant and may be given in evidence."

"Yes, yes, naturally," came immediately from the squire, who testily waved down an attempt by Loughbury to act as interpreter.

Purbright glanced at some notes. "When you came to the police station on Sunday, colonel, you were asked if you had killed the man known as Francis Dean O'Dwyer. You denied this, but admitted having fired your shotgun twice in order to frighten off an unidentified intruder. Do you wish now to change that version of what happened?"

Rich Dick leaned towards his client, but before he could say anything, Colonel Moldham replied directly to Purbright.

"It is not my custom to go back on what I have said, inspector. I did concede on Sunday, if you remember, that my having shot the man was, as I put it, a possibility. It was dark, and he might have got slightly peppered. If so, I regret it, of course. But I am quite sure that I did not kill him."

"When you say slightly peppered, sir, would that be a fair definition of two charges of gunshot, one on each side of the head?"

"My client is not here in the capacity of a gunnery expert," put in Rich Dick. "On my advice, he will not reply."

Purbright waited a moment, then asked: "Do you maintain, sir, that the man you encountered was subsequently able to run to his car, which you heard being driven away?"

"He ran off, yes. As I said."

"Can you suggest, in that case, how his body got into the river, where it was found on Saturday?"

Loughbury again intervened. "My client cannot reasonably be asked to speculate upon matters of which he knows nothing."

"Do you confirm, colonel, that the shotgun which my officers took away on Sunday was your property and that no other firearm was or is kept on these premises?"

"Certainly I do."

Purbright glanced at Love's note-taking, then at Bradley, who closed his eyes and gave a little shake of the head, and finally at Mr Loughbury.

"Is that all, inspector?" the solicitor asked.

Purbright took a deep breath and faced the colonel.

"Bruce Pendamon Moldham, I must tell you that I am now going to arrest you and take you to Flaxborough police headquarters, where you will be charged with the murder by shooting between July 27th

and July 28th this year of Dean Francis O'Dwyer, whom you may otherwise know under the name..."

"Mr Purbright!"

The interruption was not loud, but it had been delivered in so authoritative a tone that it produced several seconds of shocked silence. Every head turned towards Mrs Moldham-Clegg.

The old woman unhurriedly pressed flat the crochet work on her knee, then spoke again, without raising her eyes.

"Thanks to the unaccountable wrongheadedness of my nephew, you policemen are about to make fools of yourselves. I think I had better correct one small misconception before worse comes of it. My nephew, Mr Purbright, did not shoot that wretched burglar. I did."

Purbright looked at the colonel, then at Rich Dick. Both seemed equally at a loss, but the solicitor recovered first. "I think," he said quietly to Purbright, "that the old lady is being a little..."—he smiled, seeking the word—"...quixotic."

"Don't be so damned patronizing, Richard," said Mrs Moldham-Clegg. "It is Bruce who fancies the role of gallantry, not I."

Bradley realized that official litany was in danger of being outstripped by events. He whispered to Purbright, who hastily delivered the prescribed caution to Mrs Moldham-Clegg.

She brushed it aside impatiently. "You can say all that to Loughbury. That's what he's paid for. I simply wish to cut through these ridiculous complications and mystifications to what is a perfectly straightforward matter. Now then, first of all, you can send your young man to fetch something from upstairs."

The "young man" looked about him with good-natured surprise, then, hesitantly, rose. He looked like a Sunday school pupil responding to an invitation to take over the class.

"I think that either you or the colonel should accompany the sergeant," Purbright suggested.

The old woman nodded to her nephew. He was looking extremely unhappy. "Now look here, aunt..."

"Bruce. You will kindly take the young man to my bedroom and show him the drawer in the wardrobe." To Love, she spoke more gently: "I trust you are not as absurdly coy about ladies' undergarments as those policemen who were supposed to be searching the house the other day."

By the time the sergeant returned he had almost stopped blushing.

He handed Purbright a small rifle.

"BSA point two two repeater," he said, offhandedly.

Purbright examined the weapon. He raised his eyes to the old woman's. She was regarding him shrewdly.

"Mr Purbright," she said, "there is one thing I wish to be clearly understood. If I am going to tell you everything that happened, there must be no confusing side issues. I am too old to be bothered with all this alias nonsense. Until now, the unfortunate person whose behaviour obliged me to shoot him has been referred to as O'Dwyer. I am accustomed to that name. I wish to hear him given no other."

For a moment their mutual regard held. Then Purbright said:

"The man's wife has identified him as O'Dwyer. That is his name, so far as we are concerned."

Mrs Moldham-Clegg gravely inclined her head. Her solicitor sat motionless, determinedly avoiding the sight of Bruce Moldham's deeply anxious face.

"Very well, inspector," the old woman said. "You had better get on with that cautioning business, if you must, then we can clear the matter up once and for all."

It was, as Bradley remarked later, rather as if murder trials could now be got at Harrod's and Mrs Moldham-Clegg were putting in her order.

It had been nearly one o'clock in the morning, she said, when noises awakened her and she realized that there were movements within the house. Not long afterwards, Colonel Moldham had come to her bedroom and told her that he was going downstairs as he believed that somebody had broken in.

"He was in his dressing-gown and was carrying his gun. At night he keeps it in a corner of the landing. One never knows, these days, and we've no living-in staff except old Benton, and he's on the far side of the court.

"When my nephew had gone, I went to the window and looked out. There was a car down in the court. I opened the window at the bottom and stood listening for a while. Suddenly I heard voices downstairs. One was my nephew's.

"It occurred to me that the burglar might get away from Colonel Moldham and make for his motor car. I thought of the little two-two in what we call the Caledonian room, next but one to my bedroom, and I fetched it. I don't shoot properly now, of course, but I keep my eye in with the odd partridge, and it seemed sensible to have a go at the burglar's tyres."

At this point, Mrs Moldham-Clegg halted her narrative and peered helpfully towards Sergeant Love. "Are you managing all right?" she asked.

He said yes, oh yes, fine; and she turned to Purbright. "I'm not being tedious, am I? You must tell me if this is not the sort of thing you want."

"You are being admirably to the point, ma'am. Please go on."

After a brief, indifferent glance at Bradley, she did so.

"I went back to the window and looked down. There was some shouting and I heard someone running, then my nephew switched the outside lights on and came out into the court.

"The burglar had nearly reached his motor, but when he looked round and saw that Colonel Moldham had a gun, he stopped straight away and stood still. My nephew went up to him.

"I was just about to come downstairs and telephone the police when the burglar jumped forward and grabbed the gun. It was Bruce's fault, of course, for not pointing it at him, but one is trained not to, and one doesn't, and that's all there is to it.

"However, in a very short time indeed, there was my poor nephew on the ground, and there was the burglar, standing over him and actually taking aim with Bruce's own gun. It was quite a terrible moment.

"Naturally, I did the only thing possible in the circumstances. I shot the burglar before he could pull the trigger."

And Mrs Moldham-Clegg took up her crochet work once more, bending her head to the task.

After some seconds of silence, Purbright coughed. "And then, ma'am?"

She looked up sharply. "Then nothing, Mr Purbright. I have told you what you wish to know."

More silence, increasingly uncomfortable for all save the old woman, who seemed to have dismissed their presence from her mind.

Purbright spoke to her. "There are two things you have not mentioned, Mrs Moldham-Clegg. Your story of shooting O'Dwyer with this rifle does not account for his having received shotgun injuries. Nor have you offered any explanation of how his body came to be in the river."

She regarded him placidly. "The river is reasonably near, inspector. It seemed not at all a good idea to leave the man on the estate. Churchill and I took him to a little landing-stage at the end of what we call Shapp's Meadow."

"You *carried* the body on the horse, you mean, ma'am?"

The question was not so much ignored as simply not received. Mrs Moldhom-Clegg appeared to be waiting politely for them to leave.

"Do you wish to say nothing about the shotgun wounds?" Purbright asked.

She turned to her nephew. "Bruce, you must not forget about the Askews and that thing on Friday. I think it would be as well to drop them a note today."

The colonel made vague acknowledgment. He was frowning. His eye met Purbright's and passed an unhappy appeal.

"I am going to ask you," Purbright said to Mrs Moldham-Clegg, "to come with us to police headquarters in Flaxborough, where you will be formally charged."

The old woman put aside her crochet carefully. She stood, rugged straight her heavy woollen dress and again addressed her nephew.

"Mr Loughbury will come with me. I shall be back quite shortly. Do not forget the Askews or that man who is calling about the tree."

Purbright spoke to the solicitor, who had been alternatively half-rising and sitting again for the past minute. "Perhaps you will be good enough to take Mrs Moldham-Clegg to the car."

The old woman ignored Rich Dick's offer of an arm and went before him to the door.

Purbright turned to the colonel.

"We needn't bother your aunt with such matters now, sir, but I'll send a policewoman over later to collect her things."

Moldham nodded grimly. He caught Purbright's arm.

"You'll look after her? She's been through a very bad time, you know."

"She'll be given every consideration, sir."

The colonel stared unseeingly at the door through which Love and Bradley had followed the others. "I suppose," he said to Purbright, "that you fellows saw through all that nonsense about Arnold's pension and helping his family and so forth."

"The account was substantially that of your own solicitor, sir. He is an officer of the court; we could scarcely assume that he was trying to mislead us."

"Loughbury's a fool. Probably a knave, too, but that's by the way. The point is, that so-called pension was nothing but damned extortion. Aunt had him on her back for years, you know. When he died, Purbright, it's no exaggeration to say the sun came out for her. So just imagine what she felt when this confederate, or side-kick, or whatever, of Arnold's turned up-this O'Dwyer, as you call him."

For the generally laconic Moldham, this was quite a long and emotional speech. Purbright decided to delay his departure long enough to see if the seam of frankness was yet exhausted.

"You sound doubtful about O'Dwyer being his real name. Do you know him under any other?"

The colonel shrugged, wide-eyed. "Don't know him at all. I understand he's a petty criminal from London. Arnold could have met him in some prison, I suppose. Isn't that how these associations usually begin?"

If Moldham were dissembling, he was doing it very well. Purbright shifted ground.

"Are you," he asked, "going to tell me now what it was that

Arnold used as the basis of his blackmailing your aunt?"

"I have no idea." The reply was unhesitating and without the slightest overtone. Purbright might as well have asked the time.

"Oh, come now, colonel; here is a secret or a scandal so potent that knowledge of it can still command blackmail payments even after more than forty years. Do you seriously wish me to believe that your aunt has been able to keep it from other members of her own family all this time?"

"From surviving members, yes. From me, certainly. I'm sorry, but there it is." Moldham smiled, painfully. "I've no wish to sound flippant at such a dreadful time, but the fact is that I'd like to know myself what she got up to all those years ago."

Purbright walked thoughtfully to the door. He turned on reaching it.

"The shotgun...I'm right, am I not, in presuming that it wasn't you who fired it?"

The colonel hesitated, then looked down at his hands. "I don't know why she did that," he said, quietly.

Purbright, who did know, left without further word.

Detective Inspector Eric Bradley left Flaxborough two days later. Purbright went to the station to see him off. In expectation of the most important train of the day, the refreshment room had been opened and was now in session. Purbright bought two half pints of bottled India Pale Ale and they sat in the corner of one end of the long, narrow room, which once had had tables of white marble and curly cast iron and a mahogany counter and a gilded mirror and a wheezing tea urn big as Stephenson's Rocket, but now was fitted with plastic cantilever slabs and benches rivetted to the floor as if in fear of their being stolen.

"All right, ducks?" the custodian of the bar inquired of Purbright. She was a large woman, flushed and sweaty with an eruptive cheerfulness that neither her place of work nor her occasional appearance at petty sessions could long repress. She liked policemen—indeed, some said she lusted after them—and Purbright was taking no chances. "Good morning, Mrs Leaper," he said, with rather more formality than was natural to him.

Bradley said he was sorry to be returning to London. He would miss the ubiquitous friendliness. Even Mr Chubb had been very gracious at the last and had paid a call upon him at the Roebuck Hotel.

"Chubb is a good deal less of a snob than my superintendent," Bradley remarked. "You can have no idea how my superintendent's self-esteem will have been enhanced by the elevation of one of his parole customers to the Quality."

"Posthumously," Purbright pointed out. Bradley shrugged and took a sip of his beer.

"Anyway, I'm not sure that the Moldhams are quite top rank," said Purbright. "As I understand it, they stem from a by-blow of one of the minor robber barons."

"Good enough for my superintendent," asserted Bradley. He asked a little later: "What are you going to do if the old woman changes her mind about a manslaughter plea?"

"She won't."

"Because of her sense of honour?"

"In a way. She is aware that a bargain of sorts is implicit in our leaving the identity issue obscure."

"You are confident, are you, that bargains are kept by people such as the Moldham family? I can only say that their counterparts in London can be relied upon to put their own convenience first, whatever undertakings may have been given."

Purbright smiled. "I'm sure that that is generally the case, but we in the country have less romantic expectations of our betters. For example, it would not be found believable in Wimbledon or Muswell Hill that a lady of good address could shoot down her own son, then deliberately disfigure the features that bore so embarrassingly close a family likeness to his late uncle's, and finally rope the body to her horse and drag it to the river. Here there will be shock, certainly, but not incredulity."

"O'Dwyer's resemblance to the colonel's father must have come as a nasty surprise to the Moldhams."

"Very nasty," said Purbright. "Hence the fainting of the old woman at the auction sale—in public, heaven help us—when O'Dwyer got up to slip away."

"But was that the first she'd seen of him? The bidding must have been going on for quite a while."

"Bidders never look at one another."

Bradley accepted this axiom and glanced about him for a clock. He caught the eye of the lady behind the bar. Mrs Leaper was staring at him longingly.

Without removing the cupped hand that supported her face while she leaned on the counter, Mrs Leaper murmured for his benefit: "You've got six minutes yet, lovey."

"Talking of sales," Bradley said to Purbright, "has anyone suggested why that solicitor's clerk was putting in bids?"

"Buxton? I should say he was there 'on behalf of a client', as lawyers say when they are trying to corner something for themselves. Loughbury is astute enough to have guessed that old Whippy had hidden something among his things that would be worth risking a few

pounds. He was not to know that Gule had beaten him to it."

"Do you think he knew about the 1931 scandal and Miss Veronica's departure for North Croydon with the family coachman?"

"North Croydon?" Purbright was frowning.

"The registration sub-district on the birth certificate."

Purbright took from his pocket the paper that had been concealed in the picture frame.

"Yes, you're quite right. Sixty-five Alderton Road, Croydon. Relatives of Whippy, one assumes. They'll have got a cash payment to foster young Dean Francis."

"Until he became old enough to run away and be a burglar," said Bradley. "Incidentally, how did Whippy describe himself?"

Purbright moved his finger to the seventh column. "Simply as F. Arnold, Moldham Hall, Lincolnshire, informant."

He passed the document across the table.

Bradley looked at it for a few moments, then smiled as he returned it to Purbright. "I like the entry under 'Rank or Profession of Father'."

Purbright grinned. "It *is* rather hard to accept that Dr Damion Gule was ever anything as ordinary as a medical student."

There had been growing pulsation within the building and its captive plastic furniture. Now the windows began to tremble and the bottles to dance in their chrome gallery above the bar. Before the approaching train drowned speech altogether, Mrs Leaper roused herself from her amative contemplation of Detective Inspector Bradley and cried: "Christmas is coming! Look lively, gents all!"